



# **Arab Feminisms**

Gender and Equality in the Middle East

**Edited by Jean Said Makdisi, Noha Bayoumi  
and Rafif Rida Sidawi**

I.B. TAURIS

# Arab Feminisms

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I.B.Tauris Publishers  
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## Introduction

The chapters in this volume were originally delivered at a conference entitled 'Arab Feminisms: A Critical Perspective', held at the American University of Beirut, 4–7 October 2009. The conference was organized by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers, in cooperation with The Women and Memory Forum, Cairo, the Institute of Women's Studies at Bir Zeit University in occupied Palestine and the Anis Makdisi Program in Literature at the American University of Beirut.

The majority of participants at this conference were Arab women, both academics and activists: indeed, not unexpectedly, many of the participants are both. As the organizing committee worked on preparations for the conference we were determined to have as wide a representation in both spheres as possible. We also tried to have as wide a geographic distribution as we could. Thus we had chapters from the Arab *maghreb*, or western region, the *mashreq*, or eastern Arab region, the Gulf states, and Sudan in the south. In addition, several Arab scholars, active in Europe and the United States, participated.

But as we wished to critically place Arab feminism in a wider, global context, we invited as well several scholars and activists from outside the region, in the hope that in this mutual encounter we would learn from, and enrich, each other's debates. We invited some of these guests to present chapters within the broad themes on which we had chosen to focus, while others were asked to write short pieces on subjects of their own choosing to shed some light on aspects of feminism that we had not necessarily planned on including in our discussions. Because we felt that we were all more familiar with mainstream Western feminist thought than with that of societies more like our own, we concentrated our efforts on the representation of feminist issues not only in Iran, Afghanistan, the Indian

subcontinent and points further east, such as Malaysia and Japan, of which most of us were almost totally ignorant, but also on those produced by or on women in antagonistic situations within Western culture, such as black feminists in the USA or UK. These, we felt, would add significantly to our own debates on all matters having to do with women.

The question that interested us particularly as we began work on the conference was: Is there a genuine Arab feminist movement? The answer to this question will be clear to the readers of this book. While there is no single, all-encompassing form of Arab feminism – just as there is no such single form anywhere else in the world – different kinds and degrees of Arab feminisms, each with its own set of issues and questions, are clearly and vitally represented in this volume. The concerns and problems of Arab women in their various regions, the various political systems under which they live and work, and their various cultural histories, are translated into theoretical questions, as they have been far more obviously and publicly translated into an active women's movement. Indeed, several authors in this book explicitly differentiate between the national women's movements, members of which deal with social and legal problems similar throughout the Arab world and thus interact on a regular basis, and a less public, less popular, more elitist and generally more theoretical feminist movement. On the other hand, several other authors make no such distinction between women's activism and feminism. In either case, there is no question that feminists and activists throughout the Arab world know – or at least know of – each other, read each other's work, meet together, share many of the thoughts and experiences expressed in this volume, and try to find points of commonality between themselves.

One of the branches of this variegated set of Arab feminisms deals with the discussion of terms. 'Gender', 'gender feminism' and 'Islamic feminism', among other terms, are subject to various forms of analysis in the following chapters. In trying to define these, or even to find adequate linguistic translations for them, the terms themselves are subjected to searching explorations of history, meaning and applicability.

It is certainly not surprising that many of the chapters from the *mashreq* region – particularly Palestine, Iraq and Lebanon, as well as Sudan – deal with a subject of primary and overwhelming importance in the area: war, civil conflict, military occupation and imperialism. The place of feminism in this context is extremely problematic, as nationalist, sectarian, religious

and class interests, not to mention the interests of occupation authorities and the resistance movements that oppose them, override feminism as a public concern, even among many women. Feminists are either co-opted by these interests or find themselves in the frustrating position of negotiating their way through a minefield of contradictory imperatives and loyalties.

The various feminist viewpoints from the Gulf region is well represented in this book. Certainly the wealthiest societies of the Arab world, they are also the most socially conservative, and governed by the most autocratic regimes; thus feminists have a particularly difficult and sensitive situation to penetrate and discuss.

Sexuality as a feminist issue recurs as a theme throughout this book. Often it is tied up with Islamic custom and thought, whether conservative or liberal. Indeed, a major topic chosen as a subject for investigation by the writers in this volume is the term 'Islamic feminism'. Some of our writers find it unacceptable for the vagueness of its definition, its non-Arab origins, or its clear opposition to the more secular feminism which they espouse, while others appropriate it as fitting for their vision of a feminism that does not oppose their religious beliefs, but, on the contrary, paints a more accurate picture of a religion and culture far more invested in its women, their humanity and their welfare than is generally believed. In either case, the history and substance of 'Islamic feminism' is clearly a subject of extreme importance in the region, as is the opposing trend of secular feminism.

In their work, the international scholars and activists complement the subjects on which the Arab feminists chose to focus. Several deal with the international political, economic and military framework within which local wars and civil conflicts operate. Others deal with the question of women in Islam, casting for us an interesting light on the subject from a perspective quite different from that to which we are accustomed. The challenge to middle-class Euro-American perspectives on feminism comes not only from the Arab participants, but also from those whom we invited from abroad. Specifically, the secularist individualist brand of feminism is challenged in this volume, and a far more nuanced view is offered from the point of view of immigrants, victims of occupation and believing Muslims.

As organizers of the conference and editors of this book, we took a decision early on about language that greatly affected the proceedings. Because so many Arab scholars and activists live or write in Europe or the



USA, because we were determined to engage with non-Arabs whom we felt have much to add to our feminist debates, and because we hoped to make a useful addition to the global debate on feminism, and thus to reach as wide an audience as possible both in the Arab world and outside it, we decided to conduct the conference not exclusively in Arabic, but in both Arabic and English, and to produce two volumes: one in Arabic and one in English. Thus we had simultaneous interpretation at the conference, and after we edited the chapters for content and made them more suitable for a book, we sent every chapter for translation, either from Arabic into English or from English into Arabic.

Needless to say, interpretation and translation have their perils as well as their virtues. The editors of this volume had to deal with two books, two sets of translators and two publishers. Our work as editors entailed a double task: not only editing chapters in their original language for content, style, length and so on, which often involved following up with the individual writers; but we also had to make sure the translation was accurate, properly reflected the meaning of the author, and was rendered in language that was fluent and idiomatic.

In addition, we faced many problems specific to translation, the creation of terms used in one language to be made fully meaningful in another being only one of the most predictable. The notoriously problematic matter of rendering the English word ‘gender’ into Arabic and conveying its layers of meanings and implications, including the history of its use, is even the subject of one of the chapters. Another problem we encountered arose when translating from Arabic (or English) a text, a quotation, the title of a book or article, the name of an organization, etc. into English (or Arabic), as we were sometimes dealing with a text that had already been translated from English (or sometimes from French) into Arabic (or from Arabic into English), and therefore ended up with the translation of a translation. In these cases – and try though we did to make sure this did not happen – some quotations, titles or spellings may not always be perfectly consistent with the original, for which we apologize in advance.

For these and other reasons, it has taken longer than we anticipated to produce the final draft of this book. We hope that it will be a useful addition to the global discussion on feminism, and that it will stimulate further discussion, open up new questions, new links and new agendas.

## Themes of the book

Before we move on to a brief summary of each of these chapters, we would like to point out that we have divided the book into four major sub-divisions or themes. As we placed each paper in what we believed was its logical place, we were aware that our selections were sometimes by necessity arbitrary, as all the chapters are related to each other, and have interconnecting themes. While some of the demarcation lines between the sub-divisions are clearly justified – such as the group of chapters devoted to feminism in war and conflict zones, or those on Islamic themes – others were drawn for purely practical and logistical purposes, and do not reflect a claim to an exclusive subject matter. The nature of the chapters varies as well. Some chapters are much shorter than others: we had specifically requested short presentations from some of our participants. Some are entirely academic chapters, and others are theoretical or even polemical. We believe that this variety in the forms of the chapters properly reflects the variety of viewpoints that enrich any discussion of feminism.

### *Part One – Variety in Understanding Feminist Concepts and Discourse*

How do Arab feminists approach the complex matter of feminist concepts and discourse?

The studies in this section of the book work towards organizing reality by adopting various strategies in their feminist discourse. In general, they confront efforts to ignore feminist theoretical and analytical tools to improve the structures of Arab societies, as well as to identify those biases that exist and are counter to the interests of women. At the same time, some of these chapters criticize aspects of Arab feminist thought.

The chapters that deal with this complex matter take different approaches, thus enriching the debates on feminist discourse and its concepts, and, in doing so, reveal the breadth and importance of the topic and the range of opinions involved. Thus, while some researchers advocate the concept of *difference* rather than *equality*, others offer the option of abandoning the paradigm of patriarchal masculinity as an intellectual reference point for feminist studies, or warn against non-critical gender studies; still others see the need to introduce gender studies into the

research agenda, but not without adapting it and its history into the language and culture. While some call for the formulation and adoption of a radical course of change as an ideal vision, most chapters take a critical and probing approach, offering alternatives in concept and strategy. While one researcher sees the study of women exclusively by other women as an unnatural phenomenon, another sees it as an opportunity for female researchers to look deeply into themselves. Some notice a change in the discourse regarding the *hijab* in light of various philosophies and policies or the influence of changes in the way women's issues are addressed, depending on the prevailing political conditions and intellectual mindset. Others transcend realities on the ground and foresee a gilded feminism rising from the Arab Gulf region. Another group of researchers believe that the use of masculine concepts and terminology by certain women indicates a lack of self-awareness, or is the result of their entering new fields in which they have not yet had enough experience to form their own technical language. All the writers in this section agree on their criticism of the notion of modernity from different angles, the most important being the links between the concept of modernity and imperialism. Some praise Islamic feminist studies for differentiating between the sacred texts and their masculine interpretation, thus ridding themselves of what they perceive as an unnecessary dichotomy between Islamic and secular discourses, since as they see it, the feminist intellectual space has ample room for different discourses.

In her chapter 'What Do Women Want? A Critical Mapping of Future Directions for Arab Feminisms', Mervat Hatem defines feminism as a collection of analytical and critical tools that can be used to deepen the understanding of women, and determine their relationship with other groups of women, both within and beyond regional borders. This allows the feminist project to improve its effectiveness and the strategy it uses to bring about change. Mervat Hatem deconstructs the myths that underlie Arab feminism, such as the narrative that portrays men as the first promoters and supporters of women's rights; she criticizes this patriarchal vision. She goes on to deconstruct the second myth, which is modernity in its capacity as a social project with which the issue of women's liberation is historically associated in the Arab world. This definition of modernity fails to take into account the fact that the discussion surrounding it, which advocates educating women in order to liberate them, formed an aspect of colonial

attitudes towards Arab societies, whose aim was to find new methods to restrain and control the local population. She also criticizes the brand of feminism promoted by the state, because it gives middle-class women rights in return for their silence on the basic needs of working-class women. She then turns to the Islamic feminist current, and believes that one of this new discourse's main achievements is its rejection of the claims made on behalf of modernity and the fact that it brings the issue of the liberation of Muslim women to the fore. For a long time, the discourse of modernity succeeded in convincing many that Islam was a major obstacle to women's liberation, which is why Islamic feminism differentiated between Islam itself and its interpretation by men throughout history, blaming this interpretation for the inequality between the sexes. They proposed new interpretations for different Qur'anic *ayas*, for the *hadith* and Islamic history in a manner that helped change our understanding of women's rights in Islam. Mervat Hatem believes that this current will pose no threat as long as it avoids claiming that it exclusively represents feminism, as secular feminism had earlier done.

In 'Gender Studies in the Arab World: Reflections and Questions on the Challenges of Discourses, Locations and History', Hoda Elsadda believes that feminism lies at the lower end of the balance of international power, which is why it lacks creativity and mobility. Any knowledge produced on the margins of power very often starts by being linked to reality, and thus is able to create new possibilities and theories that aim to change existing relationships of power. She asks how any knowledge linked to an actual location can successfully resist existing frameworks and biased mindsets, and what the best strategies for effecting change are. Hoda Elsadda believes that it is important to incorporate gender studies into the Arab research agenda because it is an intellectual cultural project that involves a set of resistance strategies, including defining the biases and contradictions within the prevailing discourse, and learning from worldwide experiences in resisting these biases and producing feminist knowledge in Arabic. She does not see a problem in the controversies surrounding the translation of the term 'gender', and does not believe it necessary to have a single, unified Arabic version. She adopts Edward Said's 'travelling theory', with its understanding of changes in and evolution of the original meaning of theories as they come in touch with different cultural environments, and face different sorts of challenges.

Najla Hamadeh, in 'Recognition of Difference: Towards a More Effective Feminism', calls for generating knowledge about women and their conditions that avoids as much as possible comparisons, preferences and equating the sexes, because women are complete, self-sustained and independent entities, not lesser in any way than men. If this methodology occurs, we would arrive at a deeper understanding of the female gender and be better able to advocate for the issues at hand, because comparison and imitation could lead to competition in domains that ill suit the imitator's aspirations and talents, which is unfair to both genders and deprives society of a wider variation. Najla Hamadeh arrives at the conclusion that feminism should accept the premise that the sexes are indeed different and that there is need for a more comprehensive study of the female gender; it should also accept that there is a difference between women's issues and conditions in this part of the world, and the issues and conditions of Western feminists. We should realize, she says, that the dominant currents that support world feminism today still oppose the objectives of Arab feminism. The international order is only interested in hybridizing the reality of Arab women, while it continues to support the very authorities that insist on discriminating against them.

Nahawand el Kadri Issa, in her chapter 'Research Methods and Probing Feminist Thought', proposes that we constantly re-evaluate our research strategies, question various theories and concepts, and adopt qualitative approaches capable of dealing with complex phenomena and their particularities and contexts, while avoiding givens and generalizations, at which point feminist thought will find its natural place in the intellectual world. After reviewing a series of research chapters, seminars and websites, Nahawand el Kadri Issa notices that some are devoid of feminist thought, which is replaced by gender-oriented research lacking in feminist intellectual inquisitiveness, such as research on how to adapt the labour market and economic activities to women's fertility patterns. She concludes that there is a kind of intellectual terrorism that is internalized by the researcher. She notes gender-based divisions in the research about the media, for only women research women, and thus fall into the trap of gender-based stereotyping. In their research on legal issues, women seem confused as they search for various means to gain recognition for themselves and their rights. In doing so, however, they stumble on

conditional recognition, which is why they try to propose research methods and tools different from existing ones used by their male colleagues.

Zeina Zaatari starts her chapter 'From Women's Rights to Feminism: The Urgent Need for an Arab Feminist Renaissance' by rejecting the premise that a cohesive Arab women's movement actually exists; however, she admits that there are several regional and class-based movements, but believes that change will not occur as long as these do not complement and forge links with each other. She also believes that these movements increasingly resort to international conventions and strategies instead of public mobilization strategies, or the creation of new frameworks and institutions: thus they call for reforms in feminist thought rather than radical change. She criticizes the wrong understanding of modernity, since it has several beginnings, not all of which are Western as many believe, which is why she questions whether feminists are serious about 'destroying' the patriarchal system, since women's rights cannot be achieved unless men lose their privileges. Zeina Zaatari believes that, like leftist discourse, radical feminist discourse is not accepted popularly, and notes that right-wing institutions have learned to use the terminology of change, human rights and democracy against women and the poorer classes. She concludes that the contours of feminist thought are still unclear as they have to do with questions of rights and gender equality, since 'total equality is undesirable', and reminds us that the women's movement chooses to forget sexual and physical rights, and the discrimination against lesbians. She ends by proposing a third avenue that advocates radically changing all current social structures in light of social, class and cultural conditions.

Wafaa Hamadi wonders in her chapter 'Feminist Discourse in the Arab Theatre' about the characteristics of the Arab woman playwright and director, whose work is most often based on her sexual identity or through the issue of self-representation in a cultural and political context, rife with the production and consumption of representative subjectivities. She studies the themes of some theatrical productions and finds that women write about subjects that express their deepest and most personal issues, their repression and relationship with their own bodies, whose aesthetic contours are drawn by men. This results in a different genre of drama, particular only to them. As far as technical production is concerned, however, these women playwrights/directors have not succeeded in creating a feminist theatrical structure and a production technology with feminist aesthetics; they still

lack enough experience in this domain. They continue to rely on structures and aesthetics created by male dramatists, though they use them to embody intellectual, artistic and aesthetic visions of their own.

Jean Said Makdisi, in her chapter '*huqouq almar'a*: Feminist Thought and the Language of the Arab Women's Movements', discusses the impact of the corrupting misuse of political language on the progress of Arab women's demands. Basing her argument on the observations of George Orwell, as articulated both in his novels and in his 1946 essay 'Politics and the English language' on the relationship between political language and the exercise of power, she shows how the term *huqouq almar'a* and other terms have come to represent the decline of the once-revolutionary aspirations of Arab feminists, embodied today in an inaccurate, vague and cliché-ridden language, easily appropriated by governments and political forces not seriously interested in women's rights. This kind of language, meant to protect its users from the wrath of political, cultural and economic forces, has in fact led to the decline of both feminist and activist movements in the Arab world, and made them entirely marginal to the political processes. She concludes with the hope that the indifference of huge numbers of Arab women to feminist thought and culture can be corrected with a bold new language that can resonate with these women and have a direct influence on their lives.

Noha Bayoumi looks at the issue of female researchers as they study feminism, and asks to what extent they are able to generate and promote knowledge about femininity, and delineate its features, components and differences, in a cultural framework whose implicit context produces the vision and creates the images of femininity. She begins with the fact that feminist studies are impeded by cultural obstacles linked to the researcher's own mindset, and her submission to a cultural context that usually forces her to internalize forms of coercion, as well as cultural, social and political taboos. This affects the nature of feminist studies, erects visible and invisible barriers, confuses one's consciousness, and steers criticism towards matters of common agreement and away from more contentious and difficult issues. It also distances these studies from self-discovery and the discovery of others, which requires the researcher to liberate herself to a certain extent from the prevailing research frameworks. It puts off tackling various pending political, religious and legal issues, and promotes the culture of consensus and adaptability rather than difference. She applies this

assumption to her own research and to other works by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (Bahithat), and concludes that the problem lies in the researcher's own belief system, as well as that of the women she is researching. To change this system, the researcher should become conscious of the bounds within which she works, thus replacing this system of beliefs with another, more in line with women's constantly renewed and changing concerns. If we change our perspective of women from outside the thesis of male domination, we would perhaps find that it was, itself, a very tightly wound noose around our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of our societies.

The chapters by Gulf researchers look at feminism and its concepts from a different angle, and in a manner that is indirect and ambiguous one that betrays a certain confusion regarding the term itself as a concept, and a certain difficulty in defining the movement and the discourse associated to it. It is in this vein that in 'The Creative Arab Woman: Opposing the Stereotypical Image and Dismantling the Prevalent Discourse', Fawzia Abdullah Abu-Khaled studies women's novels, examines their self-image, and assesses the similarities and differences between the images produced by creative women and those in the prevailing cultural vision and discourse, and the degree to which these women can intervene to help form women's image in the collective emotional memory, and propose an alternative. She concludes that the tendency to highlight the multifaceted nature of woman is growing, contradicting the stereotypical image embedded in the memory and deconstructing this discourse. Nevertheless, for her, the question that remains is: 'Why, after more than half a century of effort by Arab women writers to erase the stereotypical image embedded in the collective emotional memory, are we still unable to envision a liberated woman, made of flesh and blood, heart and mind, except through cracks in the public cultural scene?'

Hatoon Ajwad el-Fassi starts by doubting the historic existence of Saudi feminism. In her chapter 'Does Saudi Feminism Exist?', she reviews the broad lines of various women's movements, monitors different activities and groups, and notes that the social and religious fundamentalism of the 1980s only became worse in the 1990s. She also notes that Saudi women have adopted this fundamentalist position in their discourse, a position that links religion to every social habit. She believes that 2002 was a watershed year, because the Saudi state took over responsibility for girls' education,



after its having been the domain of the religious authorities. She also believes that the move has given rise to a national dialogue that has allowed the unprecedented discussion of issues, including violence against women, women's image in academic curricula, women's rights under *sharia*, etc. She classifies the discourse relevant to women, noting an extremist religious discourse, an extremist religious discourse of the second degree, an adjusted discourse, a modern discourse, a non-Islamic or non-religious discourse and an internet-based discourse. She ends by opting for the term 'Saudi feminisms' to describe Saudi women's activism in the legal, artistic, academic and cultural spheres.

Suad Zayed al-Oraimi believes that genuine Arab feminism, with its own authentic cultural and national characteristics, does not exist, because the oppressive situation has prevented the seeds of real change from taking root and maturing. Despite that, she still predicts that 'a "Gulf feminism written in golden letters" could emerge from the Arabian Gulf'. She believes that Gulf women are living their golden age, at least in terms of achieving their human rights that ensure that their dignity is intact. There is no discrimination in the provision of health and education services, etc. She sees economic prosperity as an incentive for education and devoting one's time to it, and believes that the Gulf region's distance from the political problems that plague the rest of the Arab world has fostered a new generation whose mind is free of confusion and ideological partiality. She links the emergence of an Arab feminist movement to higher living standards.

In 'The Intellectual Frameworks and Theoretical Limits of Arab Feminist Thought', Kaltham al-Ghanim explores the problem of why the Arab feminist movement has not succeeded in destroying the structures which produce discrimination against women. She proposes several questions, including the following: What does the phrase 'feminist thought' mean to simple women or those close to power in the various Arab regions? Does it represent all feminist tendencies? Does it reflect the problems of Arab women? Does it represent instruments for change or is it simply a restatement of Western thought? In discussing these questions, Kaltham al-Ghanim analyses feminism by focusing on the cultural values that produce discrimination, and on their manifestations, such as domestic violence and crimes of honour.

How did non-Arab researchers address the challenges associated with feminist discourse and concepts? We will find out by looking at gender theorizing, the concept of difference and the problem faced by feminism under colonialism.

Joan Scott examines in 'Feminism's Difference Problem' the issue of 'difference', the many meanings of which help draw distinctions and capture the significance of a certain term; comprehensive is not personal, men are not women and women have differences in ethnicity, race, class, gender, nationality and religion. This concept also confuses certain all-embracing promises, such as human rights and rights for all women. It also means our need to problematize the processes of difference rather than accept them as natural or historical givens; we should view them rather as ever-changing ways of thinking about organizing society, socially and politically. When France banned the *hijab* from public schools, it based its argument on its foundational commitment to secularism, which describes itself as a necessary aspect of modernity, and religion as outside modernity, being a collection of principles beyond history. Joan Scott concludes: '[T]he reassuring thing in this moment of high tension is that, historically, feminists have been extremely adept at addressing the problem of difference; not by solving it, but by working with it, by making it a critical tool of the theory we practice.'

In her piece 'Feminism as Critique', Nivedita Menon describes the feminist movement as one of criticism, and looks closely at the impasse of feminism under colonialism in different historical periods. In doing this, she reveals the confusion surrounding the term, and the many meanings it has acquired in the process, more in line with the colonizer and ruler's designs. In India, for example, the term 'feminist gender', which disturbs the notion of biological sexual identity, has been tamed by government practices and made to signify women only, i.e. women who enjoy particular skills developed in their roles as wives and mothers. However, though these skills were supposed to help the completion of government projects, what actually happened was that the development discourse of feminist policies was tamed and rendered pliable, making the term 'women's empowerment' more acceptable than 'feminism'. She points to the kind of critique that engenders solidarity, namely the one directed at our own policies and concepts, those that make us into a 'we'.

## *Part Two – The Crisis of Feminism in the Context of War, Civil Conflict and Military Intervention*

It is not surprising that a large number of chapters on or from the Arab *mashreq* (the eastern part of the Arab region, including Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Iraq) centre on the question of the place of women in general and feminism in particular in the context of colonialism, war, military occupation and civil conflict. This context has defined the region for the last 100 years, going back at least to World War I, and even before. The defeat of the Ottoman Empire in that war, the carving up of its lands by Britain and France, the beginning of the Palestine conflict, all date to this period, as does the ongoing resistance to Western imperial interventions. The creation of the state of Israel and the dispossession of the Palestinian people in 1948, the unconditional support of the USA for Israel, the American invasion and occupation of Iraq, all with European support, have raised many questions in the region as to the declared and much-vaunted Euro-American claim of interest in democratic principles, and, more specifically, in the condition of women. Farther afield, the endless conflict in Sudan also forms part of the military context that concerns us here. Though Afghanistan itself is, of course, not an Arab country, the series of wars it has suffered, including the occupation by the USA and its allies since 2001, has played a large role in the consciousness of the Arab world: furthermore, many young Arab men fought in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union, and today some are still engaged against the USA and its allies. Afghanistan has been especially important as a confrontation point between rival visions of the nature and function of women in Islam. Both Iran and Turkey, one a theocratic state, the other secular, have also played major roles in the construction of rival feminist visions in the region.

The chapters in this section identify with the suffering of the people under occupation and their struggle for liberation, and reflect a deep commitment to the values of freedom, equality, self-determination and true democracy. Feminists are in a particularly difficult position: identifying strongly with the nationalist and liberationist movements of which they see themselves an integral part, they yet have serious misgivings about their situation in their own societies and even within the resistance movements. These points are especially clear in the chapters on the current conflicts in Palestine and Iraq. In the case of Lebanon, in which the last major military

confrontation with Israel dates back to 2006, the many long years of repeated Israeli attacks, and the brutal Israeli occupation of the south of the country that lasted from 1978 to 2000, as well as the long civil war that deeply affected the region, have entered the unconscious of the people of the area, and left their indelible mark on their lives.

Several chapters on Palestine deal with the problem of women and feminism in the context of the conflict between Fateh and Hamas in the territories occupied by Israel in 1967. In her chapter 'Feminism Between Secularism and Islamism: The Case of Palestine (The West Bank and Gaza Strip)', Islah Jad points out that Palestinian secular feminists tend to identify with international principles of human rights and the demand for individual freedoms, while members of the Islamist women's movement, who identify patriotism with Islamic activism and reject feminism as a Western import, see the progress of women from within the Islamic imperative. The two movements, however, have had to learn and benefit from each other's experiences and discourses. As they sought the power and prestige of a national movement, the Islamists had to borrow ideas from the secular feminists, who had provided a modern agenda, including employment rights, educational opportunities, etc. The secularists, on the other hand, having stressed the need for individual rights outside the context of a national agenda, had to find ways to appeal to the mass public, which had been won over by the Islamists, and to reintegrate themselves into the national resistance.

In 'Palestinian Feminist Organizations in the Post-Oslo Era: The Binary Nature of Feminist Discourse', Eileen Kuttub also tackles the question of feminism in the Palestinian West Bank, occupied by Israel in 1967, and governed since Oslo by the Palestinian National Authority. She shows how the Palestinian women's movement lost its way from having been an integral part of the national movement in the last century, and having established an agenda with simultaneously nationalist and feminist aims. Women played a major role in the nationalist movement through the First Intifada of 1987. But because of the intense repression by the Israeli occupation forces that followed the Second Intifada, including the arrests or deaths of thousands of men, women became the primary supporters of their families, and were thus cut off from the national struggle. Furthermore, the Beijing Conference and other UN institutions involved in the West Bank tended to separate women's issues from national ones. Instead of the old

ties between popular women's activities and those of the resistance and other forms of the national struggle, a more elitist, professional class of civic workers has taken over the women's movement. The result has been a diminution in the legitimacy and credibility of both the national and the women's movements.

In her chapter, 'Liberation Struggles: Reflections on the Palestinian Women's Movement', Amal Amireh writes of the problems facing women in Gaza under the rule of Hamas, and regrets the absence of an adequate feminist response to the many abuses to which women are subjected in the sector. But life under the more secular Fateh, associated directly with the PNA, offers its own dangers to women. These include the growing movement of NGOs which tend to follow the agendas of their funders and which divide the strength and power of the women's movement, once so much part of the popular struggle, into fragmented aspects of what should have been a total and integrated response. Amal Amireh analyses the use made of the Palestinian woman suicide bomber in the rhetoric of the Islamist movement that erased from the public memory the long history of Palestinian women's organic participation in the national resistance. She concludes her chapter by demanding a generally more tolerant attitude towards sexuality, a necessary aspect of feminism, which would allow the gay community to lend its hitherto hidden power to both the national and the women's struggles.

Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian takes a rather different approach to the requirements of feminist theorizing in Palestine. She starts with the totality of the Palestinian experience and lands, beginning with the *nakba* or catastrophe of 1948, and taking into account not just the territories occupied by Israel in 1967, but the entire land of historic Palestine. 'It is impossible,' she writes, 'to understand Palestinian feminist thought without listening to the voices and experience of Palestinian women, each in her own milieu, and seeing the *nakba* as the analytical point of departure and the moral cornerstone of feminist theorizing.' In her chapter, she concentrates on the quotidian experience of women under brutal occupation. In doing so, however, she wishes 'to challenge the dominant epistemological trends and theories, and come up with a new, resistance-based knowledge'. This means taking into account what it means to be 'born under a system of state terrorism'. Employing the work of Achille Mbembe on 'Necropolitics', she analyses 'the infrastructure of skills that terrorizes Palestinian women and

puts them under constant surveillance', and what she calls 'the physics of power'; finally, she articulates a theoretical 'theology of Israeli security'.

At the end of her chapter, Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian calls on feminists to support the non-negotiable right of Palestinian feminists to resist the occupation by indigenizing feminist knowledge, and by working towards 'building a feminist strategy for resistance'.

In her chapter 'The Developing Role of Colonial Feminists in Iraq', Haifa Zangana shows how several feminist organizations became directly complicit with the American occupation of Iraq in the wake of the 2003 invasion. Unconfirmed stories widely circulated on the purported abuse of Iraqi women served to provide the military intervention in Iraq with moral cover for what was clearly its colonial nature. Women who cooperated with the occupation were rewarded with political posts and financial assistance. Feminist activity undertaken by women supported by the occupation strengthened the claims of the latter that it was helping women, and thus democratizing the country. In fact, however, this mutual cooperation merely helped support the occupation's political agenda, and a gap grew between what the female officials were saying and the real condition of Iraqi women. In pinning the blame of their bitter reality on 'domestic violence', 'social backwardness' and 'terrorism', without mentioning the occupation as a source of the problem, Iraqi colonial feminists have helped undo much of the progress achieved by women in the past. Iraqi women today, she writes, 'are losing rights they fought valiantly for in the past'.

Elaheh Rostami-Povey, in her chapter on 'Afghan Women's Resistance and Struggle in Afghanistan and Diasporic Communities', paints a similar picture. The Afghans see the foreign occupation armies as the main reason for their increased poverty and misery. Afghani women especially had hoped that what they had lost under the Taliban regime would be restored, and they would be allowed to participate in the reconstruction of their devastated country. But as the war gained in intensity they were disappointed. Their oppression, writes Elaheh Rostami-Povey, is as much imperial as it is patriarchal. In responding to the position of Western feminists that feminist consciousness and social practices are necessary instruments in the battle against war, domination and violence, she reminds us that the very invasion of Afghanistan was made possible precisely by feminist rhetoric. She goes on to show that the massive power of governments as well as financial and military institutions have appropriated

this feminist rhetoric, in order ‘to mask global misogynist practices and to justify war and imperial domination’.

Mari Oka writes her piece, ‘Women Struggling Against the Legacy of Colonialism in East Asia’, from an altogether different and unexpected perspective: she describes the connection between women and imperialism from the point of view of the imperial country. She emphasizes the blocking from the contemporary national Japanese memory of the suffering imposed by Japan on those it had colonized. The enslaving of thousands of Korean women during World War II by the Japanese army, with the purpose of providing their troops with sexual services, raises for her an interesting theoretical question, even as it troubles her deeply. As she taught the work of Fatima Mernissi to her Japanese students, she finds ‘their failure to recognize the meaning of colonialism... reflects the lack of awareness in Japanese society of the history of colonialism’. Mari Oka traces her own understanding of colonial relationships to her reading of Arab feminist writing, which opened up her imagination to what women in a colonial or imperial situation have had to endure.

In an entirely different vein, Anicée al Amine Merhi tackles from a feminist and psychoanalytic perspective the experiences of women in the south of Lebanon who suffered decades of Israeli violence in the form of repeated military incursions, the brutal 22-year occupation of the region and the immensely destructive war of 2006. In this chapter, entitled ‘Conflicts and Wars: Women’s Silent Discourse’, she is particularly interested in the psychological impact of the civil war, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, including the various Israeli invasions and the occupation. She sees the women of the south as having been the protectors of their society; their story, however, remains silent and untold, and is rarely represented in the political and other accounts of the epic of gallant resistance and restitutive violence. She uses the central and founding story of Shi‘i Islam, that of the martyrdom of the Imam al Hussein, to illustrate her point. It was Imam al Hussein’s sister, the Lady Zeinab, who held the community together when, after his death, it was on the point of confusion and collapse. In this case Zeinab, like Antigone in the Greek myth, the sister faithful to the memory of her brother, became the mainstay of the community, the upholder of the communal honour and continuity. The Lady Zeinab becomes, in Anicée al Amine Merhi’s view, the symbol of the women of the south, immensely

powerful in her love and care, and especially in her steadfast resolve to carry the community to safety.

In 'The Role of Feminist Movements in Establishing Peace and Improving the Condition of Women in Areas of Armed Conflict', Amira Yousef al-Badri writes about the situation of women in the conflict zones of Sudan, most notably Darfur, and the rise of an active feminist movement born out of the necessity of dealing with the problems created by the wars. Rape, and its consequent stigma and health problems, human trafficking, the abduction of their children, vast poverty, hunger and illiteracy are only some of the social issues faced by women. Many individual women in the conflict zones also suffer depression, insomnia and other mental health problems. The women's movements therefore are mostly social networks meant to deal with social and cultural problems faced by the women. The long tradition in Sudan in which women, especially in rural areas, played an important role in the resolution of conflicts between individuals, families and tribes has shifted from individual women to women's organizations.

Dina Georgis examines a play, *Scorched*, by the Lebanese Canadian writer Wajdi Mouawad, which is an artistic representation of how masculinity was defined and warped by the terrors of the Lebanese civil war, including rape, torture and murder. The mutilated image of the brutal father and brother, the equally mutilated image of the mother who has silently borne her suffering for a generation, adding hers to the suffering of previous generations of women, is directly related, as Dina Georgis sees it, to the state of the nation, and of what she calls 'the instability of nationalized masculinity'. She concludes that the play evokes sympathy in the audience because 'it symbolizes the affective tensions between terrorizing masculinity and terrorized masculinity. By aesthetically and affectively expressing this paradox, it restores the humanity of all.'

Another war piece, this time a feminist film entitled *In the Battlefields* by Lebanese director Danielle Arbid, is the subject of Dalia Said Mustafa's chapter, 'The Child Torn Between War and the Adult World: *In the Battlefields* by Danielle Arbid'. The film is examined in the context of the limited genre of cinema literature that deals with an adolescent girl in such a way as to question masculine norms. This film explores the imagination of the girl, Lina, regarding her own sexual, social and class identity, by manipulating the space between her bourgeois family and the maid Siham. Lina's family is engrossed in a series of emotional and financial conflicts



for which the Lebanese civil war raging outside their house serves as a fitting metaphor. In her chapter, Dalia Said Mustafa focuses on the girl's Lacanian gaze, and explores its use in this film by employing theoretical aspects of feminist cinema criticism.

### *Part Three – Islamic Feminism: Approaches and Visions*

A number of chapters in this book provoke a debate on 'Islamic feminism' in Arab societies, as well as the avenues it pursues to forge its way ahead, affecting and being affected by the processes of change. This leads us to the stereotypical debate raging around the issue around the world, which requires us to take a deeper look at Islamic feminism, as well as its core, development and impact, to gauge the participation of Arab women in this debate and their contribution to it, both locally and internationally.

Chapters that address this subject shed light on the present Arab cultural and political framework that has, in recent decades, tried to keep women mired in a 'past' that suits the most extremist theories. In addition, the looming threat to Arab societies from international hegemonic forces compels socio-cultural currents to retreat, which further strengthens and entrenches the patriarchal system, thanks to its ability to renew itself in tandem with new developments. In a number of Arab and Islamic countries, such as Palestine, Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, Kuwait, Malaysia and Bangladesh, threats looming over Islamic feminism came to light as a result of the intersection, or divergence, between Islamic fundamentalism and neo-patriarchy's hold on society. This takes place in the shadow of globalization, an aggressive market, and the wars and colonialism that accompany these factors, in particular neo-colonialism, all of which scatter the focus of feminism and divide its ideological currents, declared objectives and chosen strategies.

The issues arising from the rejection by secular feminists of Islamic feminism dominate the chapters. It seems impossible to reconcile religious and secular discourses, given that all divine religions are rooted in patriarchy and that, given current social systems, it is therefore futile to talk about feminist awareness, or even about improving the status of women. The same can be said about the rejection by Islamic feminists of the secular current, because of the claim that it is skewed in favour of international

human rights discourse. A number of chapters address various objections to the concept of 'feminism' itself, on the premise that Western feminism is incompatible with socio-cultural systems in Islamic societies, especially since the term 'Islamic feminism' was coined in the West and only later introduced to the Arab world. Several researchers highlight the paucity of rhetorical Islamic feminist studies compared to the number of feminist studies produced in English outside the Arab world.

In her short piece 'Sisters in Islam', which is the name of an organization in Malaysia of which she was the founder, Zainah Anwar underlines the desire by practising Muslim women to resist religious fundamentalism, a resistance which, in her view, has helped validate and entrench the foundations of local feminism and, at other times, of a globalized feminism. This feminism manifests itself in a 'strong and growing sense among the Muslim world's women, and some of its fair-minded men, that women are indeed unfairly treated and discriminated against under the inherited, historical social structures'. Zainah Anwar gives the example of the 'Sisters in Islam', showing how its members introduce themselves as a global movement aimed at instilling equality and justice in the wider Islamic family. Moreover, the fact that they also resist the use of religion to justify discrimination against women in the spheres of law and public policy has made them the object of hostility of Islamists and religious authorities. Meanwhile, women active within the context of human rights consider activism within the religious framework as a waste of time, given that religion is unfair by nature, and because patriarchal interpretations predominate and independent interpretation is forbidden.

Under the title 'Accounting for Affect: Kuwaiti Women Between Freedom and Apathy', Mai al-Nakib reflects on Kuwaiti women's paradoxical and divergent attitudes towards the issue of freedom. For while Kuwaiti women enjoy a level of freedom that other women in the Gulf region do not, it seems that they are still restricted in terms of their personal freedom, and as far as divorce, sexual and other rights are concerned. Moreover, while a small group of them is actively resisting various forms of discrimination, there is a general lack of interest among a large segment of women in Kuwait. Mai al-Nakib analyses this lack of interest towards the very circumstances that keep these women in an inferior position. She reaches the conclusion that the freedom that Kuwaiti women seem to enjoy could actually be, on the one hand, the main obstacle to their awareness of

the restrictions imposed on them and, on the other, to the drive necessary for them to change their conditions. Class, family and religious divisions are still the main factors preventing solidarity among women in Kuwait, vital for changing the entire social setup in that country.

In her chapter 'Islamic Feminism in Egypt: Between Acceptance and Rejection', Hoda El-Saadi monitors the awakening of Muslim women in Arab countries over the past 15 years. She notes the persistent efforts by Arab Muslim women researchers, who view the need to raise women's standing in the Islamic perspective, to produce research and studies on gender and other relevant issues, and to analyse and discuss various discourses and methodologies from within the culture itself. Their aim has been to reinterpret the culture in order to incorporate it within a civilized, culturally authentic and Islam-based reformulation of the perspective of gender and, in the process, achieve their alienated rights. However, though these researchers agree on the objective, they disagree over the new perspective's definition and name; for while some Muslim researchers in the Arab world identify openly with the Islamic feminist current and have no problem using the term 'Islamic feminism' to describe their activism, others reject it and avoid using it. Hoda El-Saadi asks the key question: Why has 'Islamic feminism' in the Arab world failed to develop as much as European feminism has done? And why have there been debates and disagreements in the Arab countries around the term 'Islamic feminism'?

In her chapter 'Islamic Feminism: A New Feminist Movement or a Strategy by Women for Acquiring Rights?', Amal Grami addresses the attempt by a number of studies to ground the concept of feminism in Islamic culture, thus Islamizing it. As she sees it, the attempt has only served to expose the different intellectual backgrounds and incompatibility between the two terms; that is, *Islam* as a religious belief and *feminism* as an international, legal and civil movement that rejects the introduction of religion into the struggle of women. Objections to the term 'Islamic feminism' manifest themselves in secular feminism's rejection of any link between feminism and Islam, given their different records, and in a parallel rejection of the term by Islamic feminists, on the premise that Western feminism is incompatible with cultural and social norms in Islamic societies. Amal Grami believes that even if we try to give the movement an Islamic character, the term 'Islamic feminism' would still be unacceptable because it entered the Arab world from the West, where it was first coined.

In her chapter ‘Trends and Directions in Contemporary Islamic Feminist Research’, Omaima Abou-Bakr defines ‘Islamic feminism’ as emanating from Islam’s loftiest ideals and benefiting Islam as a religion. It allows an awareness of the discrimination against women from a feminist perspective and, from there, to an awareness of the problem’s existence, and the ability to criticize it, propose reforms and suggest alternatives. This must involve a meticulous and wise reinterpretation of Islamic religious sources free of gender bias, a reinterpretation that goes back to Islam’s authentic message, the kind of justice and respect for human dignity that equate between men and women. Omaima Abou-Bakr follows the development of proselytizing women preachers in Egyptian mosques, and the development of doctrinal and interpretative endeavours in the realm of *fatwas* by al-Azhar female scholars and experts on legal issues in *sharia*. She reminds us that these women have been sidelined from the production of research and theories that affect the ongoing debate on women’s religious scholarship, and the interpretation of gender-related issues. She ends with the key question: Are those who are able to produce alternative knowledge capable of imposing it and, through it, affecting the prevailing conditions, if they lack the requisite tools of power and authority in their respective domains?

From a purely theoretical perspective, Marnia Lazreg’s chapter ‘Post-structuralist Theory and Women in the Middle East: Going in Circles?’ looks at the impact of post-structuralism (especially Michel Foucault’s ideas) on feminist studies in the Middle East, particularly in light of the current trend towards the *hijab*. Her aim is to underline the need to be critically aware of those trends that seek easy interpretations, and that equate all women, and events and patterns of behaviour particular to them, when deeming the unusual and unexpected as necessary and inevitable. She quotes Foucault:

The critical ontology of ourselves is not a theory, a doctrine, a permanent body of knowledge; it must be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits imposed on us, and experiment with the possibility of going beyond.

Marnia Lazreg arrives at the conclusion that the vicious circle in which the current academic discourse on the *hijab* finds itself leads to one of two outcomes. The Muslim woman wearing a *hijab* is seen as worthy and as one who empowers herself through the *hijab*, and is thus elevated to the level of cultural heroine. The Muslim woman who opposes the *hijab*, on the other

hand, is seen as unable to resist the culturally false and prejudiced West. Marnia Lazreg aims to reveal the mechanism through which some prevailing, feminist, academic practices relinquish their role as dispellers of illusions.

In her chapter ‘Two Faces of the Revival of Feminist Qur’anic Exegesis: ‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman and Amina Wadud’, Husn Abboud studies the methodologies used by Egyptian ‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman, known by her pen name Bint al-shati’, and African-American Amina Wadud-Musin. She analyses the work of these two women professors from different generations, different cultural backgrounds and different educational environments, and thus two different aspects of innovative Qur’anic exegesis. Husn Abboud’s first objective is to highlight efforts by the first wave of Arab women interpreters, including Bint al-shati’, who used a philological-rhetorical methodology to interpret the Qur’an and understand the Islamic perspective of women’s liberation. She compares their work to that of the second wave of Muslim, non-Arab interpreter-theoreticians who adopt a knowledge-based reading of the Qur’an and of the concept of woman in it, through an approach that relies on cultural interpretation (i.e. ‘the hermeneutics of unity’). Her second objective is to highlight the innovative methodological contribution to Qur’anic exegesis by the two women.

In her chapter ‘Rokeya in the World: Feminism and Islam in Twentieth-century Bengal’, Elora Shehabuddin reads and interprets Bengali author Rokeya Hossain’s writings on women’s rights, dating from the early twentieth century, the first years of the anti-colonial struggle in India. Elora Shehabuddin reflects on the historic and cultural context in which Rokeya Hossain, considered one of the founding mothers of feminism in Bangladesh, wrote, and links it to the contexts in which her writings have recently appeared, to reveal the manner in which she was used and, more importantly, not used, by today’s feminists. She ends with the lessons learned from Rokeya Hossain’s writings for today’s feminists, who are struggling to ensure a better future for men and women in South Asia and other parts of the world.

#### *Part Four – Feminism in a Global Context*

The Arab world, with all its complexities, is only a part of the wider world of economic, military and political power structures that promote, make possible and expand local conflicts to a far higher and larger dimension, serving imperial interests of which the local players may not always be aware. Several chapters in this book concentrate on the relationship between that wider circle of imperial power and local actors and interests, with a special emphasis on a feminist analysis of these relationships. And all of them relate their analyses to the Arab and/or Muslim world, as well as to the wider global south.

In her chapter, 'Tracing Dollars, Mapping Colonial Feminism: America Funds Women's "Democracy" Training in Iraq', Shahrzad Mojab, a specialist in adult education, writes that an analysis of the "democracy" training programmes in Iraq shows that 'adult education ideas and practices converge with imperialist relations of domination'. War, she writes, has become a necessary aspect of development as 'post-war reconstruction'. The place of women within this framework is most instructive: huge amounts of money were granted by the US administration of George W. Bush to women's groups in Iraq. Notoriously, the American occupation authorities, to promote their ideology against radical feminism and for free markets, property rights, strong families, etc. have supported the greater influence of Islam and *sharia*, as well as other religious laws, on Iraqi women, once among the most secularized and liberated in the Arab world. Shahrzad Mojab concludes her chapter with the insistence that a 'feminist, anti-imperialist framework must simultaneously challenge the cruelty and misogyny of native and national patriarchies alongside the racism and sexism of imperialist powers'. To do so, new pedagogical theories and practices are required.

Laleh Khalili places the American policies regarding women in Iraq and Afghanistan in the wider, global context of counterinsurgency. In 'Gender in Modern Counterinsurgency', she writes of the gendered nature of counterinsurgency policies, in which race and class are added to gender, and the overall object is to demobilize the population; normal gender roles and relationships are manipulated by class and power realities. She examines the emergence of those she calls 'soldier-scholars', who replace the figure of the ferocious manly warrior and, along with the colonial feminists who use 'the language of humanitarian rescue', form an important part of the counterinsurgency effort. Much of the rhetoric of counterinsurgency deals

with the condition of women, intermingled with connections of class and race. In conclusion, Laleh Khalili describes ‘the pyramid of power’ that constitutes the US era of counterinsurgency, at the top of which rule ‘war-like feminists’ and ‘scholarly soldiers’. Their power is exercised through “‘manly” imperial grunts’ and working-class women, while at the bottom of the pyramid lies a ‘layer of conquered men and women’.

The global exercise of power that Vron Ware writes about is far different from the one described by Laleh Khalili and Shahrzad Mojab, but no less influential. In ‘Reading Between the Lines: Sexual Politics and Publishing in the Age of Public Diplomacy’, she describes, from a feminist perspective, how ‘culture itself is increasingly established as a medium of engagement between foreign governments, media corporations and global publics’ as an aspect of global power. The Western fascination with sexual practice and gender relations in the Arab/Muslim world is translated into a hugely profitable sector of the publishing industry. Feminist criticism is required to understand how this is an aspect of international relations. Focusing on the novel *Girls of Riyadh*, by the Saudi writer Raja Alsanea, Vron Ware shows how the book was marketed to become a run-away best-seller, translated into 20 languages. As a result of shifts in international relations, massive resources have been directed at translating texts between English and Arabic. ‘However,’ Vron Ware warns, ‘the convergence of governmental and corporate power in the terrain of global culture indicates that international best-sellers cannot be read outside the contemporary “frames of war”.’

In her piece on ‘The Blind Traditional Subject and Suitcase Patriarchies’, Kumkum Sangari asks whether we should think of patriarchies as entirely region- or nation-specific. Can patriarchies be seen as distinct from the globalized economy? Various forms of patriarchy, she claims, overlap and mingle with each other to continue the oppression of women. These are read into the ‘cultural’ interpretation of such practices as honour killings and *sati* as specifically Muslim or Hindu, but in fact these practices are inseparable from the global environment. Using the situation of Indian families – whether at home or as immigrant communities in the UK – as a focal point, she shows how the emphasis on choice in marriage, viewed as a one-dimensional aspect of Indian culture, has come to represent the modern, while entirely disregarding the racist state policies, which have now undermined feminist criticisms of marriage.

Hazel Carby's chapter, 'Black Feminism and the World', helps put the issues that Arab women face in the larger perspective of colonialism and racial discrimination. Black feminism, she reminds us, has its roots in movements for emancipation and liberation: anti-slavery and anti-colonial. She traces its development, both in the United States and in the United Kingdom, through various stages, showing how black women in the USA reacted to being regarded as subordinate to black men in the struggle for civil rights. This created a radical black feminist politics that inspired black creative writers and academicians. Black British feminism, on the other hand, was informed by the global movement against imperialism, and was associated with black writers and activists from various parts of the British Empire. Their struggle has been against the practices of the racist state, as well as other forms of class and gender oppression. The early manifestation of globalization was in slavery, but today can be found in such institutions as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, which are 'the direct inheritors of that trade [slavery] and manage all our bodies through the negotiations of capital'. She concludes that a transnational and multi-national feminist alliance is the only path for freedom from such forces.

Post-feminists in the north, writes Deniz Kandiyoti in her chapter 'Between Feminism and Social Engineering: The Troubled Trajectory of International Gender Activism', having challenged second-wave feminists from a post-colonial and post-structuralist perspective, shifted their interest to 'more dispersed sites and events, such as the body and the subject', as opposed to the earlier interest in power structures such as 'patriarchy', 'the state' and 'the law'. In the south, on the other hand, feminism, she says, 'was interpreted and castigated as libertarianism and licentiousness'. Thus south anti-feminists and north post-feminists met at the point where global factors were regulating a 'neoliberal regime' of gender equality, by imposing uniform rules and practices. Using the situation of women in Afghanistan as an illustration, Deniz Kandiyoti shows the cultural clash between global agendas – military, developmental and otherwise – that adopted and used feminist discourses as an aspect of the continuing subjugation of the country, on the one hand, and a variety of local reactions, reflecting the political realities, including especially anti-imperialism, in which Afghanistan was embroiled, on the other. She shows how these complex interactions have led to negative and deeply problematic results.



Jean Said Makdisi

Noha Bayoumi

Rafif Rida Sidawi

The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers

*tajammu' albahithatallubnaniyat*

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## PART ONE

# Variety in Understanding Feminist Concepts and Discourse

## CHAPTER 1

# What Do Women Want? A Critical Mapping of Future Directions for Arab Feminisms

*Mervat Hatem\**

This chapter was the Keynote Address to the conference organized by the Lebanese Women Researchers in October 2009 whose theme was ‘Arab feminism: a critical perspective’. The conference held in Beirut, Lebanon, was attended by many scholars and activists interested in Arab feminism. It offered a critical overview of the literature, discourses and the agendas used to explore and analyse the history of Arab feminism available in Arabic and in English, the two languages with which the author is familiar. A conscious effort was made to be inclusive by making reference to as many of the works and authors available in this field as possible to shed light on the lessons to be learned from the gender struggles in different Arab states. Intellectually, the paper critically examined the founding myths of the modern history of Arab women, especially the role that men played in it, as well as the contributions that modernization and nationalism made to their roles and rights. It also addressed how the state emerged as an important agent in the definition of, response to and the appropriation of the agendas of women following decolonization. Finally, it assessed the rise of political Islam and how it contributed to new discursive and political divisions among middle-class women whose activism was historically identified with the development of Arab feminism.

Sigmund Freud posed the question that is part of the title of this chapter, making it popular in the 1930s and beyond. He said this to Marie Bonaparte, one of his disciples: ‘The great question that has never been answered and that I have not yet been able to answer despite my 30 years of research into the feminine soul, is: What does a woman want?’.<sup>1</sup> Some

suggest that Freud was referring to the topic of female desire when he posed that question, but others consider it a rhetorical question that reflected the spirit of the time. Like all rhetorical questions, it assumed that it had no answer, reinforcing the mystery with which the discussion of women has been associated. Some feminists have added the important objection that it used the problematic category of 'woman' in a sweeping way that simplified the complex needs of women and their differences.<sup>2</sup> No such question is ever asked of men, who can be assumed to have innumerable wants and needs, thus making such a question about them nonsensical.

Freud's question became part of the intellectual and political histories of women's struggles to realize important political and social goals inside and outside the Arab world. Women's serious attempts to address the question in public exchanges with men, the state and/or their societies have not yielded the desired effects. The historical record shows that patriarchal societies and their important institutions ignored, devalued or selectively used their responses, distorting their agendas. This leads me to conclude that it is time that we rephrase Freud's question, asking instead: What do women want of feminism and of each other? I am defining feminism here as a set of analytical and critical tools that can be used to enhance women's understanding/consciousness of themselves, and their relations with other important national, regional and international groups of men and women. Seen in this light, feminism can improve women's agency and inform the definition of their strategies for change.

The new questions and/or the definition of feminism reflect the gains made by some women in the last century in education, public works and political rights, which have led them to appreciate the complex differences that exist among different classes and nationalities of women, and the importance of building bridges and/or forming alliances in national, regional/Arab and international contexts. I hope that future debates will provide intellectual and political steps in these important directions.

I choose as my specific focus here the discussion of some critical tasks that I consider important in the representation of the Arab feminist agendas. It includes the following: first and foremost, there is a need for a critical retrospective assessment of the history of the feminist projects in the region that reflects and privileges the voices of women instead of the dominant views of men, especially 'the grand old men of Arab modernity', who were the privileged representatives of the nation and/or members of modern

fraternities. Next, we need to address the broader task of continuing the critique of the Arab modernist projects, which developed in a colonial context and produced new forms of governmentalities that emphasized domesticity and mothering as the critical roles of women, thus putting them in the service of the nation. As part of this project, one needs to cast a critical eye on the nationalist discourses, whose history was tied to the goal of the modernization of Arab societies. Not only have these discourses lost their intellectual critical edge, but also they continue to cling to old, romantic views of modernity, ignoring the many criticisms that have been levelled against this initially European project, and especially against its production of mechanisms of gender, racial and class inequalities in Arab societies. Finally, I shall discuss how some of the failures of Arab nationalist and modernist discourses explained the recent national and regional rise of political Islam, and the present polarization between the dominant secular and the Islamist discourses that have divided middle-class women. This polarization has further weakened women, and has ignored the convergence of these apparently opposing discourses in their emphasis on the domestic/family roles consigned to women, postponing their pressing needs for employment and increased political participation.

## **Deconstructing the founding myths of Arab feminism**

There are two founding myths that are very popular in the construction of the modern history of Arab women, and which need deconstruction.

### *Men's role in the liberation of Arab women*

The first and most damaging myth is the narrative that men were the earliest advocates of the rights of women. What needs to be challenged in this narrative is not the fact that some men supported the rights of women, which is part of our history, but the partial and patriarchal nature of this historical construction and its valuation of the voices of men at the expense of the voices of women during the early period. A less romantic view of these men and their discussions of women's roles is needed so that women can begin to appreciate their agency and the role they played in history, which is what feminism is about.

The most powerful two-pronged criticism made of the founding myths of the modern history of women in the region has been comprehensively done in the study of Egypt. The narrative moves from the study of Shaykh Rifa' al-Rafi' al-Tahtawi's *al-murshid alamin lil-banat wa albaneen* (The Faithful Guide for the Education of Girls and Boys), commissioned by Khedive Ismail and published in 1873, to Qasim Amin's *tahrir almar'a* (The Liberation of the Woman) (1899), to provide founding texts of Egyptian feminism. For al-Tahtawi, women needed education to purge them of 'foolishness, thoughtlessness and frivolity that result from their living with other ignorant women'. Education would help them overcome the fact that they were inactive with nothing to do with their time, explaining 'their tendency to malicious gossip and fabrication'! I do not think I can remember the use of such harsh words to describe the lives of ignorant men, who have been exempt from such assumptions. Al-Tahtawi's views represent a clear devaluation of women's work (raising children and keeping house, which includes cooking, cleaning and taking care of their husbands).<sup>3</sup>

Amin is not much less hostile in his representations of women. He singles out Egyptian middle- and upper-class women as ignorant parasites living off the work of others. While he exempts peasant women from these charges, he still regards them as ignorant and needing to be rescued from poverty by others. To Amin, women were the pets and toys of men, which explained how they lost their brains, allowing men to dominate them as masters and guardians.<sup>4</sup> As a result, they possess overdeveloped cunning and acting skills.<sup>5</sup> I am not persuaded by the views presented by some historians that Amin's words were part of the rhetorical strategy of overstatement to exhort men to action regarding the reform of the conditions under which women lived.<sup>6</sup> Like other Egyptian modernist reformers, including al-Tahtawi, Amin believed these representations to be true of women, explaining the backwardness of their societies. They were part of a powerful discourse, popular at the time, that showed very little appreciation of the more clear-sighted local Islamic belief that 'secluded women were responsible for the flourishing status of their households'.

Beth Baron's *The Women's Awakening in Egypt* (1994) and Marilyn Booth's *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: Biography and Gender Politics in Egypt* (2001) began an important and systematic sideways critique of this dominant narrative by suggesting that a vibrant women's press had existed

since 1892 which documented the existence of the independent voices of women, beginning with Hind Noufal's (1892) *alfatat* (The Young Woman) and followed by many others. I think this particular approach provided a sideways attack on the dominant narrative because it was not a frontal attack on the views of al-Tahtawi and Amin, but sought to argue that the early voices of women should be included in the discussion of this early history. In the case of Egypt, the women's press, which began in 1892 and continued into the twentieth century and was sometimes founded by men, provided a hospitable space for women to express their views of their changing conditions and roles. In Egypt, the women's press represented the pioneering roles of Levantine (Syrian, Lebanese and Palestinian) women who settled in Egypt, who were Christian, Jewish, Sunni and Shi'i writers whose perspectives offered diverse voices for women. These women emerged as the most ardent supporters of the new modernist definitions of femininity, which put women's education in the service of modern mothering and domesticity, reflecting the history of that discourse in the West and its attempt to gain social and political legitimacy.

A frontal attack on the grand old men of Egyptian modernity, al-Tahtawi and Amin, came in the study of the works of 'A'isha Taymur, whose published works represented an alternative perspective that integrated the study of gender in that of problems facing Egyptian society. In my work on Taymur, I have tried to show how her fictional work *nata'ij alahwal fi al'aqwal wa al'af'al* (The Consequences of Changing Speech and Actions), published in 1887, blamed the backwardness of Egyptian society on the corrupting practices of some forms of dynastic government that were in need of reform. In her social commentary, entitled *mir'at alta'mul fi al'umur* (A Reflecting Mirror on Some Matters) and which appeared in 1892, she presented her *ijtihad* (religious interpretation) of how the concept of *qawwamah* (male leadership in the family) was not absolute, but contingent on men performing their familial obligations, which included supporting women and being role models in the family. This alternative set of representations of the Islamic ideals for the family and the irresponsible practices of some men that led to the ruin of their families offered a voice for women in diagnosing some of the social ills that accompanied colonial materialism. Taymur's views provoked debate among public figures, leading them to recruit the Azharite Shaykh Abdallah al-Fayumi to refute her claims. In contrast, Abdallah al-Nadim, the popular nationalist figure

who played an important role in the Urabi Revolution, fleeing from the police for eight years through refuge offered by ordinary Egyptians, praised her book, trumping the attack by al-Fayumi. However, while al-Nadim agreed with Taymur's diagnosis of the problems facing Egyptian families, his solutions were different from hers, and reflected male interests.

Hoda Elsadda's study of the work of Malak Hifni Nassif moved one step further in challenging the founding myths by arguing that the work of this other pioneering woman, who was a contemporary of Amin, established Nassif as the earliest critic of the modernist project.<sup>7</sup> Nassif was clear that the views of modernist men about unveiling and women's education that emphasized the domestic roles of women were not liberating. It represented a new form of dictating to women a male agenda for change. Worse, they attempted to stifle the critical voices of women, like hers, which advocated the gradual abolition of the veil to protect women from the predatory behaviour of men towards unveiled women in the streets. She argued that the public debate at the time ignored the need for the education of men about how to relate to unveiled women in new ways. The modernist men and women at the time, including the literary critic Mayy Ziyayda, who was of Palestinian-Lebanese parentage but became a naturalized Egyptian, did not agree with Nassif's critique, and accused her of being more conservative than Amin and Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid, who were seen as progressive advocates of the expanded rights of women. This provided another example of how some women inadvertently participated in the devaluation of the dissenting views of women and privileged the views of men as part of a new modernist patriarchy.

The sideways challenge of the dominant male narrative that argues that men were not alone in discussing the change of gender roles of women is presently going on in the study of the history of North African women. In two research papers that were presented in the conference organized in Beirut in 2000 by *tajammu' albahithatallubnaniyat* (the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers) on Arab women in the 1920s,<sup>8</sup> Dalenda al-Arqash provided many examples of Tunisian women coupling their attack on seclusion, represented by the veil, with an interest in education and the support of modern society,<sup>9</sup> and Fatma al-Zahr'a Qashi traced the same phenomenon as it took place in Algeria, though at a slower pace.<sup>10</sup>



While this is a step forward, the frontal critique that is needed of the work of Taher al-Haddad, whose works are considered the equivalent of those of Amin in the Tunisian context, coupled with a parallel critique of the political agenda of al-Habib Bourguiba, first president of Tunisia after independence, have not developed. They are necessary and important steps that can yield insights as to how their agendas for women privileged male views and the demands of the state, granted women some new rights, but developed a new form of patriarchy.

In Lebanon, Nazeerah Zayn al-Din, a Muslim woman writer who emerged in the 1920s, made a frontal attack on the views of Muslim and Christian religious men opposed to the unveiling of women. It is quite interesting that Zayn al-Din was able to represent the interests of all veiled women irrespective of religion in her *ijtihad* regarding veiling and unveiling. Her rationalist reading of Islam made it clear that veiling was not the only condition of being a Muslim woman and that the veiling prevalent at the time covering women from head to foot was alien to *al-hijab alshar'i*, the legal/religious veiling required of Muslim women, which allowed that the face and hands need not be covered. It is important to note here that Zayn al-Din was attacked by Muslim and Christian men, who equated her call for change as a call for moral disintegration.<sup>11</sup> Students of Gulf women are contributing new insights to our understanding of their distinct experiences and the role they played in the founding myths of their young modern nation states. Madawi al-Rasheed, the Saudi historian, offered an interesting take on the circumstances that surrounded the creation of the modern nation-state in her country.

In the discussion of the early history of the state, it is often noted that Abdel Aziz Ibn Saud's consolidation of the Arabian Peninsula under his rule in 1926 was the product of his marriages to more than 134 women, thus producing offspring and blood ties that united its many tribes.<sup>12</sup> The literature on this period emphasizes how these unions created important political alliances, echoing the original polygamous unions of the Prophet Mohammed as he tried to consolidate the strength of the early Islamic community. Al-Rasheed disputes this benign and straightforward political argument, complicating our understanding of marriage as a venue for sexual politics in the early twentieth century. While political marriages gave women political power and visibility, she shows how these marriages usually followed the defeat of a tribal group, thus formalizing Saudi

domination. In these unions, the women chosen to marry Ibn Saud clearly had to bear the burden of the humiliation of the tribe by becoming the wives of the victor. With 134 wives, Ibn Saud married four at a time, divorcing some and sometimes remarrying them. The personal and the social pain these unions caused the women, who served the interests of their tribes and Ibn Saud, emphatically challenged the romantic and idealized representation of political marriage as a form of sexual politics and a venue for political participation.

Jill Crystal presents a somewhat interesting twist on this narrative in her discussion of the role that women played in the creation of the Kuwaiti state.<sup>13</sup> She suggests that the history of the 'Utub tribe was associated with that of the al-Sabah family, which gave an important role to Maryam, the daughter of the sheikh who eventually gave the tribe its name and national credentials. Among the members of the *bani utub* were those who supported Maryam's refusal to marry the powerful sheikh of the *bani ka'b* tribe at the threshold (*al'ataba*) of her residence, explaining the name *bani utub*. Branches of the tribe, afraid of the consequences of this daring decision by Maryam and her supporters, split off and migrated to Qatar. That the honour of the al-Sabah family, the *bani utub* and, later on, the Kuwaiti nation-state were thus associated with the defence of the Islamic right of Maryam to choose her marriage partner, by refusing this political marriage, is a central component of this founding myth.<sup>14</sup>

Andrea Rugh traces the same trajectory – that is, using political marriage to cement the cohesion and the alliances among the ruling tribal families – in the history of the principalities that constitute the present-day United Arab Emirates.<sup>15</sup> Through marriage, women of the princely families emerged as strong political actors, advising husbands and sons on important political matters including succession. Outside of the ruling families, ordinary women played an equally important role in Gulf economies, whose dominant activity up until the 1920s was pearl diving, which took men away from their families for long periods of time, leaving women in charge.

When oil production replaced pearling as a dominant economic activity, the rentier state continued to rely on political marriages. With more state revenue, women of the princely families took on new activities. The advent of women's education, usually attributed to the enlightened role of kings and princes, was actually due to the pressure and influence of some of their women. A good example is that of Queen Effat, wife of King Faisal, who

was behind the establishment of the first school for girls in the 1960s. This influence was not public and occurred behind the scenes. Therefore, the invisibility of Gulf women in the political, economic and social histories of their societies has now finally been challenged.

Paradoxically, these national narratives stress the important right of Muslim women to choose freely whom they marry, as was underlined by the Kuwaiti case and the use of marriage to serve state interests in the cases of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Al-Rasheed's historical work should be seen as developing a critique of tribal politics through the questioning of political marriages as a satisfactory channel for women's political participation, and the burdens that it imposed on some women.

### *Modernity and discipline*

The second founding myth of Arab feminism that needs to be deconstructed is that which credits the West and modernity with expanding women's rights. It overlooks the fact that the modern definition of women's education, motherhood and domesticity occurred in a colonial context, and was part of the goal of controlling the subject populations through their acceptance of the universality of the modernizing project and its definitions of gender roles. This way, colonial policy was to 'penetrate that inaccessible space [...] and thus commence [...] to work from the inside out'.<sup>16</sup> What sealed the success of this colonial modernist project was the fact that most nationalists, secular or Islamist, men and women, bought into it. This powerful assumption is being seriously challenged in the Egyptian literature through the work of young scholars, such as Omnia Shakry, among others, who have looked at the disciplinary aspects of modernity and its use of gender roles in the service of new forms of governmentalities. This work has demonstrated the fact that women's education was put in the service of men and the family, and that it created a new form of domestic and domesticated femininity.

What I like most about Shakry's work is that she is able to connect the modern definitions of femininity in Great Britain and the United States with those that were developed in the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. All relied on scientific European pedagogy to support a key argument about the role that proper mothering plays in the building of

the nation. She suggested, however, that while this discourse served the imperial concerns in the metropole, it was primarily preoccupied with nationalist resistance to the colonizers outside of Europe producing different responses in the South Asian and Middle Eastern anti-colonial settings.

The women's press in Egypt in the 1890s was a powerful vehicle for the advocacy of these new forms of the discipline or control of women. The critical assessment of this literature is yet to begin, with the dominant reading emphasizing its positive importance in the modernization of society and gender roles. The problematic aspect of this colonizing modernization process, with its emphasis on the control of women's bodies and minds through the new obligations expected of women without giving them an equal position at the discussion table, has not been sufficiently discussed.

## **Arab nationalism and the problematic emergence of state feminism**

The literature on the modernization of Arab societies privileged the role of the state in the equalization of the relations between men and women. It is the institution that can extend new rights to women, and take on the reform of the personal status laws where gender inequality for Muslim and Christian men and women remain clear.

Soon after political independence was achieved, some authoritarian Arab states nationalized the gender agendas of upper- and middle-class women, and provided them with more expanded rights to education and public work with political rights as a crowning achievement. In exchange, many Arab feminists supported these states, which resulted in a national takeover of gender agendas to serve their political legitimacy. This was true of Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Algeria, Libya and eventually Jordan. These states presented themselves to their citizens and the world as socially progressive states that embraced gender equality, even though their political authoritarianism could not be doubted.

The attempt by the Gulf States to copy some aspects of this model have been largely unsuccessful because of the exclusion of many groups in these societies, including the male nationals and non-nationals – as, for example, adherents of Shi'a Islam in Bahrain and the *bedoun* (so-called 'stateless') in Kuwait. While the period from the 1970s to the present has witnessed the

expansion of women's rights to education and public work, the extension of political rights to women remained part of the larger problem of absent political participation. Bahrain and then Kuwait have been exceptional in extending political rights to women, but in Kuwait the *bedoun* remain without rights. In Bahrain the fair representation of the majority Shi'i population remains a major problem. The rest of the Gulf States, such as Qatar and Oman, are cautiously experimenting with some form of municipal or local representation for men and women.

The examination of the impact that these diverse state policies have had on Arab women in general revealed that their major beneficiaries have been middle- and upper-class women. In exchange, the latter have for the most part remained silent regarding the many unfulfilled basic needs of working-class women, thus undermining the ability of these different groups to form successful social and political alliances with each other. The result of this silent bargain has weakened the power of women to negotiate with the state. In addition, the state neutralized the active segment of middle-class women by recruiting them to play the role of 'femocrats' (feminist bureaucrats), who occupy visible government positions and switch their allegiances from women's cause to the state. The states' control of the gender agendas and the appointment of some women in visible positions allowed them to improve their national and international reputations. These were the key historical features of Arab state feminism.

This paradoxical role of the Arab state, which partially supported women's formal rights of citizenship (for education, public work and political participation narrowly defined as the right to vote and run for public office) in exchange for controlling and dividing them, poses a number of difficult questions for feminist groups working on gender issues in the region. What political strategies should women's groups use to make demands on the state without giving up their independence? Do women need the state, now that they have gained most of their formal rights: to education, work and political participation? The answer to the last question is that women continue to need the state to reconfirm these rights and spread them to working-class women. State repression in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia against protest movements was very vicious in its targeting of women who joined broad coalitions for the spread of democratization. For example, the Egyptian state has increasingly employed thugs to target women who participated in protest activities

against state authoritarianism. Similarly, state and Islamist violence in Algeria targeted women to settle scores against each other. Finally, Islamist groups have copied the state strategy of supporting women political candidates to show their women-friendly character and to put forward more conservative gender agendas.

All of this has shown how the nationalization of the gender agendas of women by dominant political forces and groups has begun to yield diminishing returns. There is therefore a need to think about strategies that can be used by women to make state repression and control more costly to those who use them. One tactic that has recently emerged in a regional context is the reliance on international actors and policies to change authoritarian state policies. Alliances with active women's groups in the international arenas offer a mixed outcome: they embarrass these states, but at the same time they can be used to reproduce the old argument that women and/or feminist groups are not loyal citizens, and that they encourage foreign intervention in the affairs of the nation.

### **Between secularism and Islamism: new divisions among middle class women**

The rise of political Islam in the Arab world since the 1970s, its popular support, and successful re-Islamization of the discourses of many Arab societies, have been viewed with hostility and suspicion by the secular and nationalist intelligentsia and feminists alike. They have rightly seen the rise of the Islamist discourse and its advocates as threatening their privileged position and their dominant discourse. For the most part, the Islamist discourses have shown themselves to have conservative social and political gender agendas. The widespread embrace of the Islamic mode of dress by Muslim women has shown the popularity of the Islamist agenda among younger middle-class women. Secular older women have been mostly uncomfortable with the spread of this new mode of dress as a symbolic retreat from earlier approaches to Islamic dress that equated unveiling with the golden age of Arab feminism.

While this reactive attitude is understandable, it does not justify the objectionable language used by some secular feminists to denigrate and devalue Muslim women who have chosen the modest and conservative Islamic mode of dress. These same secular feminists base their attitudes on

stereotyping a sizable section of Muslim women based on their dress. As far as I am concerned, this attitude is not different from the Orientalist representations of Muslim women and shows the extent to which some feminist women have internalized clichéd views of Muslim women. Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi provide prominent examples of this attitude,<sup>17</sup> and are joined by the Algerian Khalida Massoudi,<sup>18</sup> and the Jordanian Member of Parliament Tujan al-Faysal in their attack of the *hijab*, and/or the modestly dressed Muslim women as backward and opposed to social progress.

El Saadawi stands out among these prominent Arab women as an iconic figure of Egyptian and Arab feminism. She discussed male and female sexuality at a time when the topic was taboo; consequently, she was fired from her position in the Egyptian Ministry of Health. This did not stop her efforts to engage in public debate, organize women and pursue a feminist agenda. State harassment eventually led to the closing down of her organization, Arab Women's Solidarity, in 1991. In all of these activities, she built an impressive feminist record.

In the 1980s, when the Islamic mode of dress, *alhijab*, spread among younger women, El Saadawi coined a popular phrase in articles published in her association's magazine, *Noon*, that summarized her negative attitude towards that development. She described the Islamic mode of dress as the equivalent of *hijab 'ala al'aql* (barrier to reason). This particular phrase showed the extent to which this feminist had internalized the Orientalist view that used Muslim women's dress to summarize their entire existence and the only indicator of their passivity or agency. Most empirical studies of the social attitudes of the women who wear *alhijab* have indicated that they shared the educational and work aspirations of their secular counterparts. Nor were these women different from secular women in their emphasis of their aspirations to marry and have children. In fact, my examination of the secular and Islamist public discourses on gender showed that both stressed the primacy of women's family roles.<sup>19</sup> What is ironic about El Saadawi's denigrating view of the Islamic mode of dress is that it mimicked past and present condescending attitudes of Western feminists towards Muslim women's dress, which Arab feminists criticized. With El Saadawi, who is Arab and Muslim, making similar negative representations in Arabic of other Muslim women based on dress, Arab feminists seemed to have come full circle.

To be fair to El Saadawi, many secular intellectuals retain a crude belief that religiosity and rationality are antithetical to each other. This very simplistic and crude representation of the vast realm of religion and spirituality is not useful. What it shows is a fundamental lack of tolerance of the complex needs of women and the different religious, ideological and generational choices that they make. The *hijab* may not be my choice, but one cannot in the name of feminism deny others the freedom of choice that one wishes to enjoy. Doing so shows a tendency among some secular feminist women to monopolize agency for themselves and to deny it to their Islamist counterparts. I think the work of Saba Mahmood has offered a powerful critique of this attitude and its assumptions that should be helpful to many of us as we ponder what these differences mean to a feminist agenda.<sup>20</sup>

## **Islamic feminism**

One of the most important developments that emerged from the rise of Islamism as a dominant social and political force in the Arab world is the recent debate on Islamic feminism. This new approach to feminism in the region debunked one of the most cherished assumptions of the modernization literature on Arab women and their societies. For the longest time, the modernization discourse convinced many Muslim women that Islam was an obstacle in the struggle for women's liberation. The only way they could achieve equal rights is through secularism, which marginalized Islam as the source of gender inequality in divorce, inheritance, marriage and testimony in court. It is now clear that students of modernization offered a crude reading of the Qur'anic text that overlooked the mediating role of the male interpreters of the religion. As a result, modernization offered Muslim women only one choice: if you are a feminist or a supporter of women's rights, you must operate outside the Islamic religious and moral framework. Islamic feminism lays this argument to rest. It makes an important distinction between the religious texts and the male interpretations that have dominated our understanding of its religious tradition. One of the most promising theorists of Islamic feminism is Omaima Abou-Bakr, whose work offers a framework for reinterpreting Islam and its religious traditions from a 'woman-friendly' standpoint.<sup>21</sup> I like her argument that when the early Muslim women complained to the



Prophet about how some Qur'anic verses were addressed only to the male believers, leaving women out, the revelations that followed responded to these grievances, leading Abou-Bakr to state: 'If God were open to the needs and concerns of women, how can one justify interpretations of the divine text that sought to exclude or deny women their rights?'<sup>22</sup>

It should be pointed out here that, in addition to Abou-Bakr, there are others who work on developing these 'women-friendly' interpretations of the religion. They are working on issues that relate to divorce, inheritance, court testimonies of women and adoption. Farida Banani of Morocco and Zaynab Radwan of Egypt are other women who are attempting to build a Muslim religious tradition in which Muslim women's voices and perspectives are available to counter the dominant male interpretations that have contributed to gender inequality in Arab societies.

Last but not least, it is possible to be simultaneously opposed to the political project of Islamism, which is the creation of a religious/Islamic state, but to support the project of Islamic feminism. If one supports the efforts by some Muslim women to introduce gender-friendly interpretations of the Islamic religious traditions and Islamic history, I do not see this as a cause of a major division in Arab feminist circles. The danger may come from the attempt by some Islamic feminists to reproduce the old objectionable attitude of some secular feminists who wished to monopolize the right to speak for all women and to silence dissenting feminist voices. If Muslim feminists deny the secular feminists their place at the table in the discussion, then we are doomed to repeat history instead of moving forward.

We have come a long way, but our journey is far from over. There is a lot of work that still needs to be done, but I am more than confident in our collective ability to do it.

## Notes

\* Howard University, Washington, DC, USA; Middle East Studies Association; and Women and Memory Forum, Cairo, Egypt.

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2. Conversation with Dr Susan Lazar, 19 September 2009.

3. Abdel Rahman al-Rafi'l (1951), *asr muhammed 'ali* (The Age of Mohammad' Ali) (Cairo: Egyptian Nahda Library). Also cited in Mervat Hatem (1999), '*a'isha taymur wa qasim amin wa ru'a mutamayza lil hadatha*', in *mi'at 'am 'ala tahrir almar'a* (One Hundred Years After the Liberation of the Woman), 1, pp. 103–27 (Cairo: al-majlis al-'a'la lil thaqafa).

4. Qasim Amin ((1899) 1984), *tahrir almarát wa almarát aljadida* (The Liberation of the Woman and the New Women) (Cairo: The Arab Center for Research and Publishing), p. 27.
5. For extended citations from Amin, see Hatem, ‘‘a’isha taymur wa qasim amin wa ru’a mutamayza lil hadatha’, p. 113.
6. Margot Badran (1999), ‘Women and Qasim Amin: the rise of a feminist discourse’, in *mi’at ‘am ‘ala tahrir almar’a* (One Hundred Years After the Liberation of the Woman), 1(93) (Cairo: al-majlis al-’a’la lil thaqaafa).
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## CHAPTER 2

# Gender Studies in the Arab World: Reflections and Questions on the Challenges of Discourses, Locations and History\*

*Hoda Elsadda\*\**

Is there an Arab feminist school of thought? What is 'Arab feminism'? Did it impact its cultural and intellectual environment and the situation on the ground, and, if so, did it produce new male and female researchers? I start with these questions and will rephrase them in the following manner: did Arab feminism succeed in fostering an alternative knowledge, one that increases feminist awareness and strengthens the position of feminist activists in Arab societies? Are there gender study programmes at Arab universities? Are there specialized gender study curricula in Arabic? If we assume that language is not just a means of communication or transfer of information, but a requirement for creativity in knowledge production and a necessity to indigenize human sciences, how available is scholarly feminist material in Arabic? What language do gender studies use in the Arab world? What is the status of translation, the translation of feminist theories into Arabic to revive contacts between Arab and non-Arab feminists and, more importantly, integrate feminist concepts into the Arabic language?

There is a general perception of feminist movements in the Arab world as weak, due to their distance from cultural and social realities, or their failure to introduce fundamental changes on the cultural and political levels. There is also a feeling that there has been only a modest intellectual and theoretical contribution by female, Arab feminist researchers in general; in other words, they have had a limited ability to create or establish on solid grounds a feminist thought capable of impacting the Arab cultural

environment. In order to try to assess Arab feminism on the theoretical and practical levels, I shall focus on the difficulties (or rather challenges) we face in our effort to integrate gender studies into the Arab research agenda. Among the signs that these difficulties do indeed exist are the scarcity of well-established gender study programmes at Arab universities (though new programmes have been on the rise recently), the sparse specialised material on feminist theories in Arabic, and the polemic surrounding the translation of feminist terms and concepts, such as the term ‘gender’.

There were attempts during the past decade to assess various efforts aimed at establishing women’s or gender study centres at Arab universities, among which was a seminar organized in June 2004 by the Bahithat (Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), under the title ‘Seminar on the integration of a gender-sensitive perspective into the academic policy of the Lebanese University’.<sup>1</sup> Several papers presented at the seminar shed light on women’s and gender studies programmes around the world, and specifically at Arab universities and study centres. They considered the significance of integrating gender into academic specializations such as law, sociology and psychology, and ended with a project that includes the broad lines of a potential gender integration process at the Lebanese University. In the context of highlighting the difficulties that face such an endeavour, Fayza ben Hadid focused on the link between these subjects and various recommendations by international conferences and research agendas of donor agencies, and the rarity of specialization among Arab researchers. Ben Hadid concluded by saying that ‘the major obstacle facing the integration of gender into Arab universities is the absence of political will’.<sup>2</sup> For her part, Fadia Hoteit expressed her belief that the reason for the strong rejection of gender by Arab cultural institutions lies in the term’s ‘vocal dissonance with the Arabic language’, and the ‘resistance of prevailing mindsets to the introduction of a “Western” concept, which ends up being treated as a form of intellectual colonialism’.<sup>3</sup>

In this study, I will address the challenges that face projects that aim to integrate gender studies into Arab research agendas, and engage in a conversation with the article by Samia Mehrez, Professor of Arabic Studies at the American University of Cairo, entitled ‘Translating gender’.<sup>4</sup> Mehrez highlights the obstacles and problems that led to the failure of several attempts by Arab researchers, both men and women, to agree on a translation of the concept of ‘gender’ into Arabic. She uses the concept of

translation to address the translation of terminology, a concept she also uses to signify the transfer of ideas and theories from one culture to another. In her paper, Mehrez refers to an interview conducted with me by the journal *Alif*,<sup>5</sup> which she sees as an attempt on my part to translate or introduce gender studies to the Arab reader. Mehrez's thoughtful and perceptive paper encouraged me to carry out a parallel contemplation process that builds on her proposition, while at the same time engaging critically with it.

### **Conceptual challenges: in search of the correct word**

Mehrez comments at length on the failure of Arab women researchers to agree on a translation of the word 'gender'. She mentions that some researchers use the term *naw'* (social kind/species) or *jins* (sex, derived from the Greek word *genus*), and then refers to no. 1999 of *Alif* in which the editor, Ferial Ghazoul, uses the term *junusa* (derived from the root *janasa*) as a translation of 'gender'. She states her preference for the latter because, contrary to the Arabized English-language term 'gender', it is derived from an Arabic root word, can be conjugated, has the same rhythm as *unutha* (femininity) and *thukura* (masculinity) in Arabic, and because it reflects the term's dynamism and does not cast it in a 'static essence'.<sup>6</sup> Mehrez ponders the fact that despite Ghazoul having suggested the use of the term *junusa* in the introduction to a special issue of *Alif* dedicated to gender and knowledge, contributors to this same issue of the journal chose not to use it, opting instead for other translations. Mehrez wonders:

Why have we chosen to translate gender in the most essentializing terms when we have a language (Arabic) – and language is a process of meaning construction – that is far more open to creative invention as demonstrated by the example of the neologism *junusa* that was coined, but hardly ever used, by the editors of *Alif*.<sup>7</sup>

Mehrez goes on to say that the failure to agree on the term *junusa* as a translation of the word 'gender' is a shortcoming and an indication of feminist researchers' inability to construct new meanings that allow the integration of gender studies into Arab culture. In her opinion, the term *junusa* is a creative formula that not only respects Arabic conjugation rules but is also derived from an Arabic root word, a fact that helps its integration into the language, then the culture, instead of using terms like *naw'*, *jins* or gender which, she believes, promote notions of separation and difference.<sup>8</sup>

In another context, when addressing the translation of the *Encyclopaedia of Women in Islamic Cultures*, Hala Kamal, who coordinates the translation of the *Encyclopaedia* from English into Arabic, explains the importance of agreeing on a single word when translating concepts that underlie feminist theory:

Yet sometimes terms and words [such as queer and gender] had to be unified on the basis of the role of *EWIC* Arabic in knowledge production and the formulation of Arabic terms of expression for this knowledge.<sup>9</sup>

Like Mehrez, Kamal argues for the necessity of agreeing on translations of concepts in Arabic as a prerequisite for strengthening gender studies in Arabic. It is noteworthy that Kamal used the term *junusa* for 'gender' in her translation of Leila Ahmed's book, *Women and Gender in Islam*.<sup>10</sup> However, perhaps due to the lack of enthusiasm with which the term *junusa* was received, Kamal decided to use the Arabized term *jinder* consistently in later translations.

These discussions of the trials of 'gender' in translation serve to highlight the following questions. First: should we consider the absence of consensus on a translation for the word 'gender' a sign of the failure of Arab feminists to integrate feminism into the Arabic language and culture? Second: should we seek a single correct word? And, assuming such a word is found, should we consider all other translations incorrect?

The answer to these two questions is divided into two parts as follows.

#### *(a) On the travel of concepts across cultures*

Edward Said wrote about 'travelling theories', and the ensuing representation and institutionalization of a particular concept once it comes into contact with a new environment and interacts with a different set of challenges. Let me also refer to Joan Scott's article 'Feminist reverberations',<sup>11</sup> in which she says that reverberations created by the movement of a voice from one place to another inevitably engender new or different voices. She uses the notion of *reverberation* to evaluate the course of feminist theory in the twentieth century, and opposes the prevailing view that it is a purely Western product. As proof, she traces and highlights the contribution of Julia Kristeva who, though born and educated in Bulgaria, and having been influenced by Bakhtin, moved to France and became one

of the founders of French feminist theory.<sup>12</sup> The idea of travelling concepts or theories requires that translation be liberated from the confines of its moment of origin or inception. In other words, the definition of a certain concept based entirely on its meaning in the culture that produced it, and on a rigid and static understanding of that culture, ignoring its continuous and renewed exposure to and interaction with other cultures, and the new forms it might take after it moves to a new place, with different factors and agendas. Based on this, once we stop searching for the right word we realize that there is no single correct translation of terms; there are, however, translations that express certain visions or means of inter-cultural interaction, or different methods of interacting with prevailing local and international discourses. For a translation – any translation – necessarily expresses the positions and interests of the translator.

By looking at different translations of the word ‘gender’ coined by Arab women researchers, it is clear that each has its own basis as well as its own effects. The term *naw’*, for example, is in line with the early understanding of gender since, unlike today, it was in the early 1960s just a grammatical term with no particular feminist connotations. Feminists used it in the 1970s to create new meanings that underlined the notion that discrimination between men and women has nothing to do with nature – that is, it is not a biological but a socio-cultural issue. Gradually, the concept acquired new meanings and significance until it became part of the language and entered the English dictionary. The concept of *naw’* in Arabic has so far not acquired the same significance as ‘gender’ except in certain academic and developmental circles that use it in their line of work. If we take the course followed by the English-language term ‘gender’, as a potential model, we could say that the possibility of *naw’* acquiring new signification in Arabic is not far-fetched, and is probably linked to a wider use of the concept. Like all other languages, the Arabic language renews itself by acquiring new words and terms to express new meanings that reflect change.

The term *naw’ ijtima’i* reflects an attempt to highlight the notion that differences between the sexes are linked to the individuals’ socialization and upbringing in a particular cultural context – that is, it contains an explanation of the notion and a confirmation of the meaning deemed useful by a large number of Arab feminists. It is not my intention here to conduct a thorough analysis of the significance of different translations; my aim is to refute the idea that one translation is necessarily ‘better’ or more ‘accurate’



than the others. The existence of a variety of translations reflects a diversity of research methods and agendas.

*(b) On the travel of concepts through time within the same culture*

In addition to travelling between different cultures, concepts also travel through time within the same culture. This became very clear in a seminar that took place in January 2008 and was organized by the Women and Memory Forum, on the translation of feminist terms into Arabic. The seminar was attended by researchers and translators involved in a project to translate a series of Readers on gender studies in various disciplines, such as gender and literature, gender and sociology, gender and psychoanalysis, gender and history, to give some examples. The seminar's aim was to discuss different terminologies and concepts, and coordinate among participants in the project, with the view of agreeing on the terms in translation, and unifying them as much as possible. There was agreement on most terms, but 'gender' became the subject of a lengthy discussion among us researchers and translators. Options on the table were *naw'*, *naw' ijtima'i*, *jinder* (Arabized) and a new term, *istijnas*, coined by one of the participants, Abir Abbas. A long debate ensued over the issue, but no consensus was reached. We therefore agreed to include all translations in the glossary, and to leave the choice of terminology to the individual translator. Our decision to include all the proposed terms meant that we acknowledged the fact that there was no single correct word, and that choosing a word – any word – had to do with the translator's style and her own definition and use of the term in an Arab context.

However, after considering the rich debates that took place among the participants, another angle became clear (one that has not perhaps received due attention when addressing the various difficulties that face translation) – namely, the travel of concepts or theories through time, and within the same culture. The meaning of gender in the 1970s, as feminist researchers used it, is very different from its meaning in the 1990s, as Judith Butler used it, for example. The significance of the use of gender in the 1970s was meant to foreground the social and cultural construction of sex roles. Butler, however, proposed a theory to the effect that it is a 'performative' process that relies for its survival and propagation on repetition and imitation, and

confirming that ‘gender’ is a process not necessarily linked to people’s biological sex.<sup>13</sup> Consequently, the chosen translation of the term had much to do with the different stages of the concept’s use and signification in the original texts, and varied according to the changes it underwent rather than being simply the outcome of the translator’s position and agenda.

## **Challenges posed by the balance of power and strategies of resistance**

In an interview in a special issue on gender and knowledge, published in *Alif*, about matters related to research on women and gender studies, as well as about strategies for activist involvement and the challenges facing women activists/researchers, the editor Ferial Ghazoul asked a number of researchers to pose questions about various aspects of my work and research. The topics covered a range of subjects in my line of interest, and other activities related to the support and publication of research in Arabic on women and gender studies in the Arab world. Both the questions and the answers revolved around the complexities and circumstances of a research project closely linked to the agenda of a women’s rights activist: what are the most important issues relevant to the history of women in the Middle East? Who decides what the priorities of research on gender studies are, and how could they best express conditions in the Arab world? What role does the study of history, art and literature play in changing social conditions? How can this research avenue remain in touch with the public at large and not be confined to a narrow intellectual elitist circle? Is there any coordination between research centres and women’s rights organizations? In light of the Women and Memory Forum’s interest in reviving the role of women in Arab and Egyptian history, how can we avoid reviving a romantic image of the past that has no knowledge value apart from the mythical aspect of this history? The interview included even more confrontational questions:

How can we study a secondary concept like ‘gender’ when the principle one, ‘citizenship’, that involves both men and women as citizens, is absent? Can we impose foreign concepts like ‘gender’ on another social reality, such as the Arab world, which has its own specific language for referring to women’s rights issues, namely, the status of women, or Personal Status Law? Indeed, the very word has no Arabic translation. How do you explain the West’s willingness to fund any project having to do with globalization, civil society, gender and governance? Are

these concepts value-free? Are they not rather antagonistic to the idea of the nation-state and national sovereignty?<sup>14</sup>

Mehrez used this interview as an example of an attempt to introduce women and gender studies, or to use her words, to translate gender, into Arabic. Commenting on the questions and answers, she argues that they 'map out not only the location of gender studies in the wider Egyptian context, but the sites of resistance and areas of misconceptions with which it has to contend as well'.<sup>15</sup> She focuses on the interview's confrontational questions<sup>16</sup> in general, and on Hassan Hanafi's questions in particular, and says:

Despite their studied fullness and documentation, Elsadda's answers to Hassan Hanafi's questions, in particular, expose some of the blind spots in the secularists' discursive strategies within the field of gender studies that seem to be besieged in what resembles a war zone minefield. Indeed one could characterise some of Elsadda's remarks as a counter-attack rather than calculated and strategic arguments that would enable conversation and translation.<sup>17</sup>

Mehrez concludes, based on this analysis, that the basic problem underlying translation, or the execution of gender studies in the Arab world, is the Arab feminist researchers' failure to overcome entrenched ideological divisions in the region, especially between Islamists and secularists, and their failure to formulate new meanings or new frameworks of knowledge.

I would like to shed light on two of the points Mehrez raises in her analysis. The first is her description of the clash with Hassan Hanafi as a traditional clash between Islamists and secularists. The second is that she sees attempts to expose the bias hidden in the questions as a wrong strategy liable to prevent communication with those who reject the proposition, and impede the creation of new meanings. On the first point, I believe that Mehrez's analysis is irrefutable proof of the predominance of a modernist paradigm premised on a binary opposition between secularists vs. Islamists, modernity vs. authenticity, etc. All the points of contention that Hanafi raises actually express the secular, liberal and nationalist position vis-à-vis women's issues. The notion of priorities, or the rejection of concepts related to women's issues, while accepting other Western concepts, are all positions typical of a prevailing nationalist liberal discourse that the Islamists, among others, use (Hanafi is in a middle position between two warring discourses, a position that some consider ambiguous). The confrontation with Hanafi

centred round those ambiguous areas (i.e. the blind spots in the nationalist liberal discourse). It was not a secularist vs. Islamist confrontation.

The second and more important point concerns the manner with which dialogues or confrontations with dominant or authoritarian discourses are dealt with and managed. ‘What about power?’ I ask. In her analysis, Mehrez assumes that the clash between the nationalist liberal discourse (Hassan Hanafi) and the feminist discourse (Hoda Elsadda) is between two discourses of equal authority and dominance. She does not address at all the fact that the feminist discourse is under siege and gives the impression, in the course of outlining my qualifications, to my being in a certain position of authority (we could consider specific locations that could grant the feminist discourse a certain degree of authority, but it cannot at all be classified as dominant and authoritarian). There is no comparison between a dominant nationalist discourse that has historically been suspicious of feminism and all matters related to it, and can easily, and without exerting much effort, question and discredit feminists and their projects, on the one hand, and a feminist discourse besieged for historical and political reasons, on the other. Early calls, in the late nineteenth century, for more rights and freedoms for Arab women coincided with the colonization of the Arab world, forcing the defenders of women’s rights to confront a torrent of questions on the cultural legitimacy of their cause, or whether it is worth including on the list of priorities. Today, more than 100 years later, the same questions are still being asked. The pressing question, however, is how we deal with power, or with discursive power. How do we create new meanings in a cultural and political environment rife with bias and preconceived ideas? What are the strategies of confrontation?

### **Conclusion: the feminist researchers’ responsibility in creating new meanings, and talking strategies**

Mehrez’s article was written in English and my interview with *Alif* was in Arabic; I start with this remark in order to shed light on one of the challenges faced by the Conference on Arab Feminisms: A Critical Perspective: Language. In an earlier conference on Arab women in the 1920s, those of us involved in the preparation agreed that the exclusive language of the conference would be Arabic. Did this alienate a number of Arab participants and specialists who did not speak Arabic? Or did it help

promote dialogue among the participants, whose preferred language of communication was Arabic? Although we decided not to make an issue of language in the conference on feminism, we nonetheless asked those participants who use both English and Arabic to present their papers in Arabic. This could sound like a secondary issue and not a serious obstacle to dialogue, assuming the will to dialogue exists. However, it highlights the situation and context in which we operate, a situation that has existed for such a long time that we have become used to it, and might even be tired of discussing and, therefore, try to ignore or downplay it. I am talking about a situation in which there are several Arab feminist languages, several tools and several circles of dialogue that are not necessarily compatible. Most often, these circles operate alone, although they do sometimes intersect and coincide, but there is no stringent rule defining the relationship between the intersecting circles. The mere fact that they exist is a challenge that we should not ignore. For historical and political reasons, Arab feminism is in a highly volatile in-between space that impacts directly and indirectly on how matters develop, including questions on language, identity, strategies of confrontation and resistance.

Moreover, this space lies in between unequal poles as far as the balance of power between them is concerned: some of them have the power and authority to formulate and impose discourses on the weaker ones. Arab feminism is one of these weaker poles in the international balance of power, and therefore does not have the freedom to be creative and active. I would like to refer here to an article by Nancy Hartsock, entitled 'Feminist standpoint revisited' (1998), in which she talks about the experience of the marginalized and their inability to either ignore or work outside the frameworks imposed on them. She quotes Gabriel García Márquez, who said upon receiving the Nobel Prize for literature:

Our crucial problem has been a lack of conventional means to render our lives believable. This, my friends, is the crux of our solitude... The interpretation of our reality through patterns not our own, serves only to make us ever more unknown, ever less free, and ever more solitary.<sup>18</sup>

At another level, knowledge produced in the margins of power is often more in touch with specific realities, and is therefore a 'situated knowledge', that can potentially create new possibilities and 'new epistemologies', and can work towards changing existing power relations.<sup>19</sup> The question for Arab feminists becomes: How can the production of a

situated knowledge resist prevailing frameworks and biased opinion, and what strategies should be adopted to affect change in the face of biased and dominant discourses?

The effort to integrate gender studies into the Arab research agenda is first and foremost an intellectual cultural project that comprises a set of strategies of resistance, among which is shedding light on, or exposing, the bias and contradictions in dominant discourses. It also involves drawing lessons from international experiences in resisting bias and, last but not least, in producing feminist scholarship in the Arabic language that is sensitive to and expressive of the specific realities of geographical and political locations.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* University of Manchester, Manchester, UK, Women and Memory.

1. The seminar's proceedings were published under the title: *Gender in Higher Education: Proceedings of the Seminar on the Integration of a Gender-sensitive Perspective into the Academic Policy of the Lebanese University*, edited by Fadia Hoteit, Azza Charara Beydoun, Anicée al Amine Merhi and Husn Abboud, UNESCO, Meeting of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers and the Lebanese University, Beirut, 2005.

2. Fayza ben Hadid, 'Integrating gender into Lebanese Universities', in *ibid.*, p. 31.

3. Fadia Hoteit, 'Women and gender studies at Lebanese Universities', in *ibid.*, p. 34.

4. Samia Mehrez, 'Translating gender', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 3(1) (Winter 2007), pp. 106–27.

5. Hoda Elsadda, 'Women and memory, an interview', *Alif: Gender and Knowledge: Contribution of Gender Perspectives to Intellectual Formations*, 19 (1999), pp. 210–30.

6. Mehrez, 'Translating gender', p. 111.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 112.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Hala Kamal, 'Translating women and gender: the experience of translating the *Encyclopaedia of Women and Islamic Cultures* into Arabic', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 36(3–4) (Fall and Winter 2008), pp. 254–68.

10. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam* (1991), translated by Hala Kamal and Mona Ibrahim (Cairo: The Supreme Council for Culture, 1999).

11. Joan Wallach Scott, 'Feminist reverberations', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 13(3) (Fall 2002), pp. 1–23.

12. Scott, 'Feminist reverberations', pp. 14–15.

13. Judith Butler (1990), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, second edition (London and New York: Routledge).

14. Elsadda, 'Women and memory, an interview', pp. 210–30.

15. Mehrez, 'Translating gender', pp. 117–18.

16. Here are three examples of my answers. In answer to the comment that gender is a 'secondary' concept, I say: 'The word secondary means that there are priorities; it is a way of thinking used usually to prioritise the interests of a certain group that seeks to impose its interests on society as a

whole by convincing everyone in it that its priorities are also theirs.... The concept of something that is “secondary” also assumes that calling for women’s rights is against men or against their interests...’ (Elsadda, ‘Women and memory, an interview’, p. 216).

To the remark that the concept of gender is a Western product and has no Arabic translation, I say: ‘As to why the concept is a Western product; I think we ought to also ask: why did terms and theories come from the West in the twentieth century, and not from the Arab world? We have no qualms using terms like democracy and citizenship, terms that were neither coined, nor were they the product of Arab research. Why do we translate or conjugate many terms, and all the material related to them, and adopt and defend them, but always stumble in translations and familiarity when the subject concerns women? If we say *naw*’ we refuse to understand it, and if we say gender we get upset because it has no Arabic root (democracy has no Arabic root, either)’ (ibid., pp. 218–19).

In response to the question on the West’s readiness to fund gender, civil society and other such projects, I say: ‘We cannot confine the issue of funding to money coming from the West and ignore other sources like the many Arab and Asian countries. I am not so naive as to ignore or deny the problems and challenges associated with particular funding sources and their aims; however, and totally aside from this particular question, I am also suspicious and wonder about the intention and aims of those who use the issue of funding as a political weapon’ (ibid., pp. 224).

17. Mehrez, ‘Translating gender’, p. 122.

18. Nancy Hartsock (1998), ‘The feminist standpoint revisited’, in *The Feminist Standpoint Revisited and Other Essays* (Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press), p. 243. Translated by Abeer Abbas, in *Feminism and History*, edited and presented by Hoda al-Saddah and Abeer Abbas (Cairo: Women and Memory, 2010).

19. Ibid., pp. 244–5.

## CHAPTER 3

# Recognition of Difference: Towards a More Effective Feminism\*

*Najla Hamadeh\*\**

If true knowledge of its subject matter is essential to the success of any project, feminists must give special attention to studying the female component of humanity. For similar reasons, specific feminist groups, such as Arab feminists, ought to investigate the true circumstances of women in their societies, avoiding hasty assumptions and borrowed causes that may confound their problems and their needs with those of global feminism or of some other specific feminist groups. In both undertakings, feminists are advised to avoid (as much as is possible) traditional power-bound falsification and to benefit from the current favourable changes in power relations.

This is because power-strategies lead either to self-serving or to maliciously falsified judgements, as Friedrich Nietzsche's philologically based analysis in *The Genealogy of Morals* maintains. More specifically, conscious and unconscious patterns of power-bound falsification are pointed out by Michel Foucault in *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Examples of how those holding the sceptre of power formulate 'information' that often claims to be descriptive of the very essence of those they dominate or who wield less power than themselves, as in Western writers' representation of Arabs and Muslims, are given and analysed in Edward Said's *Orientalism*.

The revelations of these thinkers shed a new light on the propagation of false views about women throughout the long epochs of unquestioned male dominance. Ancient as well as more modern examples of such falsification abound, from Aristotle's deduction, based on the assumption of the general



superiority of men, that they have more teeth than women,<sup>1</sup> to the repeated and rarely challenged presupposition that rationality and morality are predominantly male characteristics.<sup>2</sup> A similar bias is seen in the use by medical researchers of male subjects, then drawing conclusions that include women; and in theories of psychoanalysis that often make males the measure compared to which females are hastily pronounced to be inferior in desire, super egos and the ability to love.<sup>3</sup>

However, women themselves may have contributed to neglecting the study of women, such as when feminists in the 1940s and 1950s belittled differences between the sexes in order to justify their lobbying for equal rights. Simone de Beauvoir's famous statement 'One is not born a woman, one becomes a woman' is representative of a stance that may lead to neglecting the study of women, as such, on the pretext that they are not unlike men.

Moreover, cultural and linguistic specificities may sometimes constitute an additional factor that discourages the pursuit of the study of women. For example, the fact that in some Western languages, human beings are referred to as 'man' or '*l'homme*', designations that include females without paying them much attention, may encourage the neglect of female persons, as such. It encourages considering women either as adjuncts to men or as the private better-left-hidden half of humanity. Indeed, whenever women were singled out, it was usually to claim their inferiority to men, in mind, strength and/or will.

It was left mainly to some contemporary female philosophers to challenge such judgements. Thus Virginia Held argues that judgements about female morality penalize women for internalizing society's expectations of them, to give care priority over achievement.<sup>4</sup> Carol Gilligan challenges the arbitrary moral elevation of judgement and the equally arbitrary devaluation of moral emotions, such as mercy,<sup>5</sup> and Annette Baier criticizes moral philosophy for upholding exclusively male-favoured criteria, such as principles, to the exclusion of gender neutral characteristics, such as trust.<sup>6</sup> Medical researchers have become more attentive to the inclusion of women subjects, but the claims of psychoanalysis continue to deceive some female, even feminist, thinkers, such as Nancy Chodorow<sup>7</sup> and several adherents to and practitioners of psychoanalysis.

## **The current situation**

For present-day feminists, overlooking natural differences is no longer a needed strategy and may not be always in the interest of feminist aims. For example, ignoring discrepancies between maternity and paternity may have been a good initial strategy for procuring rights for mothers similar to those that fathers possess; but nowadays, acknowledging the difference between the roles of mothers and fathers has led to favouring mothers' rights, as is the case in most countries of the Western world. The movie *Kramer vs. Kramer* (1979) deals with fathers' protests against this reversal of legal 'bias'.

Foucault observes that political changes are causing radical modifications in scientific methods, creating a great interest in women. The existence of Women's Studies Departments at so many universities proves the correctness of his observation. Similarly, Theodore Zeldin describes our time as one in which women have invaded the public sphere, with all the consequences of this invasion on power centres and on the aims and interests of humanity.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, after centuries of studies focused mainly on men, and after all the hasty and biased theories about women, the need to study women, from a less biased and more objective or fairer stance, must be clearly and pressingly felt.

## **Investigating women as different from men**

One important argument for delving into the study of women lurks in the claim that women and men are so different from each other that one cannot learn about one gender by studying the other, as was implicitly believed. Actually, several new scientific discoveries and new theories encourage the belief in the existence of important differences between the two sexes, whether in their nature or in their socially acquired characteristics. For example:

1. After a lifetime of research, Deborah Tannen concludes that men and women 'cannot understand each other, that they mean quite different things when they speak, that women want comfort from those they converse with, while men seek solutions to problems'.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, if the unconscious mind is structured like a language, as Jacques Lacan

maintains, and is central to personality development, as the belief in psychoanalysts entails, then linguistic discrepancies between the two sexes of humanity must cause the gender differences between them to be considerably exceeding those of non-speaking species.

2. Psychoanalytic theory maintains that humans differ from other species in their premature birth, the type of socio-linguistic structure one gets exposed to during nurturing, as well as early experiences stored by one's memory which leave lasting impacts on the structuring of one's personality, and on the nature of one's respective desires. But psychoanalysis has not investigated enough what its theory entails in terms of structural variation between the sexes, caused by discrepancies in socialization as well as in the impact of different linguistic form. For example, theories of psychoanalysis play down and often disregard the impact of the structural difference in the pre-Oedipal stage, whereby the significant other for the boy is someone from the opposite sex (the mother), while for the girl it is someone of the same sex (the mother).<sup>10</sup> Such a difference at a crucially formative stage of the child's personality is expected, within the framework of psychoanalytic theory, to lead to far-reaching differences that psychoanalysts have not explored sufficiently.
3. *A General Theory of Love*, written by Thomas Lewis, M.D., Fari Amini, M.D. and Richard Lannon, M.D., is based on evidence from observed workings of the human brain and on facts pertaining to evolution theory. In it, the authors maintain that the human brain is made up of three parts: the earliest, from an evolutionary point of view, is the part that corresponds to the brain of reptiles and is concerned merely with the survival of the individual. The second to evolve is the limbic brain, shared by all mammals. It is the locus of the emotions, primordially love of one's offspring. The last part to evolve is the cerebral cortex, which is peculiarly human. It is the locus of reasoning and of the acquisition of language. The three physicians/scientists claim to have discovered by monitoring brain activity that it is the limbic brain rather than the cortex that is responsible for decision-making and that determines the patterns of the functioning of each person's personality. According to them, the limbic brain decides or motivates, and the cerebral cortex engages in explaining and justifying decisions that have already been taken. Thus it is the

emotional factor, especially emotions towards one's offspring, that rules patterns of behaviour.<sup>11</sup> From this, one may conclude that the expected difference between paternal and maternal emotional patterns must lead to structural differences between the two sexes at the source of what determines the workings of their personalities.

4. The hypotheses proffered by some of the authors of papers published in *What Makes us Human?*<sup>12</sup> are capable of leading to the belief in the existence of discrepancies between the two sexes in factors claimed to be the most crucial in defining their humanity. For example, Susan Blackmore's claim that what distinguishes humans is their power to imitate and emulate<sup>13</sup> may lead one to deduce that since men and women tend to imitate or emulate different models, the two genders of human beings must constitute two different types of humanity. Also, the paper co-authored by Michael Corbalis and Thomas Suthendorf, which maintains that what makes us human is our ability to travel mentally from one time to another, between a past preserved by memory and an imagined future,<sup>14</sup> may justify the belief in discrepancies between the sexes caused by structural variation in the ways each gender tends to travel mentally between times. Thus women may be expected to do a lot of waiting and day-dreaming or indirect planning (when the power to implement is not in their hands), whereas men are more likely to initiate future projects and think more critically of the past, in preparation for better planning of future projects.

These examples do not only point to the need for studying women as different from men; but their lack of coherence with each other points to the need for critical evaluations, regarding how close to, or far from, the truth each study or theory is: Is it language or love that is the most crucial factor in the structuring of the personality? Are the characteristics of imitation and/or the mind's travel between times so crucial as to be the main distinctions of humanity? The need for pondering and for research is extensive.

Moreover, one advantage of focusing on women, as such, as neither adjunct nor inferior to men is that it is much more likely to lead to a fuller and less biased knowledge. Power positioning and power seeking clearly interfere with scientific rigour, and moving away from power politics discourages feeling apologetic about differences or trying to belittle

discrepancies. Current developments that encourage looking for differences between the sexes help what has long been suppressed, camouflaged or denigrated to show its true face finally, its identity, its value and beauty. This course serves feminists to come to themselves at last, as women; and by discouraging imitation, it promotes the enrichment of society with variety.

## **Arab and global feminisms: differences and similarities**

In addition to the general recognition of differences between the sexes, Arab feminists need to investigate the many ways by means of which their issues and challenges vary from those of other feminists, especially Western or globalized feminism. They also need to study the specificities of their cultural backgrounds in order to understand the sources of their problems, in preparation for appropriate strategizing.

It is a fact that women in the West have attained their rights within the family, while Arab women are still shockingly dispossessed of them. Arab feminists are sometimes lured into focusing on ‘gender’, ‘empowerment’ and ‘good governance’, regardless of the relevance of these concepts to their causes. Sometimes they do this to imitate the more powerful feminists and sometimes in order to participate in global conferences and/or to acquire funding from international organizations. This causes them to neglect their more pressing problems, such as the problem of family legislation. It also creates a rift between them and the vast majority of poor and peasant women, who have not had a Western-style education, as well as from the national struggle against Western hegemony. In so doing, they lose perspective, time and effort, as well as the support of their wider local population.

For instance, are we to follow blindly present-day Western feminism’s current involvement with political representation? Experience may show that acquiring political rights while still denied family status rights results in arriving at decision-making positions nominally, but not effectively. This was the case when a Lebanese woman recently became a minister in the government as a result of her curriculum vitae happening to be on the desk of a top official, as he himself said on public television. What was achieved by her appointment was that a woman joined the ranks of the stooges of the high official, who merely parrot his ideas. Her ‘breakthrough’ caused her to

gain precedence, in protocol positioning, over women with a history of integrity and active involvement in public issues. Neither women nor the feminist cause gained much from this one woman's streak of good luck, which occurred in response to feminist demands for participation in decision-making.

Where the issue of political decision-making is concerned, circumstances for Arab women vary on many counts from those of women in the West. Indeed, they frequently vary between one Arab country and another. In an individualistic citizen-based society, as in the West, family status and political decision-making may not interfere much with each other; but in Arab societies that have not yet totally shed their tribalism, decision-making is often influenced by family status. Moreover, where tribalism is still deeply ingrained, such an insult as the one to which the woman minister mentioned above was subjected may not take place, for fear of offending her tribe; but in a country like Lebanon, where tribalism has been greatly weakened but citizenship has not yet taken root, a woman trying to accede to decision-making may find herself without the protection of either tribe or citizen-status. Thus divested, and with little family status, she may not be spared humiliation, nor can she accede to effective decision-making.

Indeed, when Arab feminists study their own societies, they may realize that political rights are not as huge an obstacle for them as they were or are for women in the West. They may come to agree with Fatima Mernissi's claim that Islam gives women equal status to men in the public domain and denies them equality only within the context of the family, in the pretext of the need to contain the power of their native shrewdness and seductiveness.<sup>15</sup> The findings of the authors of *Women's Rights and Islamic Family Law: Perspective on Reform*,<sup>16</sup> whose multi-national research revealed that feminist struggles in Islamic societies are faced with insurmountable obstacles in attempts to change family laws and with surprisingly smooth sailing when they embark on reaching equality in work and/or citizenship, reinforce Mernissi's claim. Both indicate that the big hurdle for Arab or Muslim women is family laws.

At the present time, Arab feminists working on family laws focus mostly on a critique of Islam's position towards women's rights, or on seeking a reinterpretation of Islamic family laws. Looking, however, for the origins of Arab women's inferior family status, that predate or supersede Islam, as, for example, Nawal El Saadawi,<sup>17</sup> Fatima Mernissi and Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid

do, may prove to be a more appropriate, easier and more effective course of action.

## **Cultural, non-Islamic factors behind the lower family status of Arab women**

If attention is directed to comparative linguistics, one finds that the Arabic term for human being, *insa-n*, does not leave out women in the way that the English and French terms *man* and '*l'homme*' do. One also observes that, on the contrary, the many Arabic terms that refer to the sexual act are very denigrating to women. *Wate* (trampling) is not the harshest among these expressions. Counterparts to the latter in French and English are much more egalitarian. Such linguistic discrepancies reinforce the family-status aspect of Mernissi's stance, and carry it beyond Islam, to Arab culture in general, a position to which certain pre-Islamic historical accounts bear witness.

History tells us of pre-Islamic Arab women's involvement in poetry, trade and even war, on the one hand, and of a trend – among the more affluent tribes – to bury daughters alive in order to evade the humiliation, to them and their tribes, of their having to succumb to sex, on the other. Such accounts constitute plausible explanations to phenomena such as the subjection of non-Muslim Lebanese women, until 1959, to the rulings of Muslim jurisprudence, when their co-religious communities elsewhere enjoy much more equitable laws, and when their country claims to relegate family laws to the appropriate religious affiliations. What, other than deeply rooted cultural factors, could have sustained such a phenomenon, for many decades?

Actually, once the role of culture or of individual biases in the explanation of religious texts is located, a different style to exegesis of religious text becomes acceptable. For example, in *dawa'er alkhawf* (Circles of Fear), Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid ascribes Islamic societies' currently arresting dialogue in matters of jurisprudence to the Indian theologian, Abul A'la al-Mawdoodi, in the aftermath of independence (1947), and his choosing to place jurisprudence on a par with doctrine, a choice adopted by Sayed Qutb and other jurists. Their reading of *sharia* differed from that of al-Ghazali and al-Shafi'i, whose focus was on the totality of intent. Abu Zeid maintains that the al-Mawdoodi style in theology, which resorted to fixed biological differences between the sexes

instead of taking its cues from Qur'an-based egalitarian pronouncements on reward and punishment, caused anyone who challenges (or even argues about) jurisprudence to be accused of heresy. Had they taken the earlier, more egalitarian springboard, they would have left the door open to the evolution of family laws, as well as to enlightened rationality in Muslim society generally.<sup>18</sup>

## **Problems common to Arab and other feminists**

Nevertheless, there are issues that are common to all feminists. For example, if the frequently made observation that most of the important composers, writers and artists are men is painstakingly and objectively investigated, one might find explanations other than the one hastily rushed into that women are less talented.

Lisa See, an American writer of Chinese origin, undertook extensive research on the Chinese opera *The Peony Pavilion*. She discovered that in seventeenth-century China, thousands of female poets lived off their poetry, and that these poets (some of whom were of outstanding talent) were later crossed out of literary records. This caused See to deduce about products of women's talents that: 'It's just that too often what they did was lost, forgotten, or deliberately covered up.'<sup>19</sup> She found out that the ingenious commentary on the opera was written by the two wives of the man to whom it is ascribed. Similarly, Fatimah Orzoweel claims in *sowar nisaiyah* (Images of Women), that the work of Arab female poets used to be deliberately neglected and dropped from records, except when it dealt with topics that social tradition condoned, such as elegies.<sup>20</sup> She writes that women who wrote love poetry used to be beaten, as is evidenced by this quotation from a female poet cited in al-Jahith: 'You may beat both my abdomen and back, but you can never touch (hit) the heart within my chest.'<sup>21</sup> Another indication of the error of limiting women's creative production to what they have copyrights to is John Stuart Mills' acknowledgement that some of the innovative ideas in his books were his wife Harriet's. Giving credit where it does not belong, however, does not always happen innocently, as with Mill; for example, several contemporary critics of Nazira Zeineddin suspected that her *alhijab walsufur* (Veiling and Unveiling) was written by her father. Some had the audacity to argue that a



mere woman could not be capable of such convincing argumentation and such powerful reasoning as the book contains.

Aside from society's tendency to obliterate women's creativity, women's own attitudes towards their achievements may cause their evading recognition. For example, when recently a friend of mine retired from a position in which she had a spectacular and unprecedented success, a position she was the first female in the history of the country to occupy, she expressed her satisfaction at being finally relieved of this high-powered task and at her having served a good cause. Men who occupied the same position before her had clearly resented having to leave it, and focused much more on their own breakthroughs than on the general success of the institution.

In *An Intimate History of Humanity*, a woman is said to have left her boyfriend because he kept pushing her to perform and compete. She is quoted as saying: 'I like writing but not publishing. He enjoyed speaking in public, and was good at it. I am different. I have different potentialities. I wish to avoid rivalry.'<sup>22</sup>

So many other areas, relevant to feminists working for the general cause and/or for causes pertaining to their particular societies, await investigation and reconsideration in reparation for better strategies and more effective activism. This time the world may be ready to accept, celebrate and joyfully harness the female differences for a more interesting and more efficient world for all. Above all, feminists need to avoid intimidation, short-cuts and prestige-seeking that cause them to belittle the differences between the sexes or between issues that feminists, particularly in third-world societies, need to address, and those tackled by feminists in more prominent and more affluent societies, when they do not coincide with their own.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Lebanese American University, Bahithat.

1. See Aristotle, *De Anima* (The History of Animals), Book II, Part 3.

2. See, for a summary of such views of Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, Virginia Held, 'Feminist transformation of moral theory', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50, Supplement (Fall 1990), pp. 321–34.

3. Sigmund Freud, for example, 'On narcissism: an introduction', in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XIV (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1953–66).

4. Held, 'Feminist transformation of moral theory'.
5. Carol Gilligan (1993), *In a Different Voice* (Boston: Harvard University Press).
6. Annette Baier, 'Trust and anti-trust', *Ethics*, 96(2) (1986), pp. 231–60.
7. Nancy Chodorow (1974), 'Family structure and feminine personality', in Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (eds), *Women, Culture and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
8. Theodore Zeldin (1994), *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: HarperCollins), p. 15.
9. Deborah Tannen cited in *ibid.*, p. 40.
10. See Najla Hamadeh, 'amma ibki baddi rifkah', in *hafriyyat wa taharriyyat: hayawat nisa' 'arabiyyat* (Out of the Shadows: Investigating the Lives of Arab Women), *Bahithat* (Journal of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 11 (2005–6).
11. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini and Richard Lannon (2000), *A General Theory of Love* (New York: Vintage Books), pp. 20–26.
12. Charles Pasternak (ed.) (2007), *What Makes Us Human?* (Oxford: One World).
13. Susan Blackmore (2007), 'Imitation makes us human', in Charles Pasternak (ed.), *What Makes Us Human?* (Oxford: One World), pp. 1–16.
14. Michael Corbalis and Thomas Suddendorf (2007), 'Memory, time, and language', in Charles Pasternak (ed.), *What Makes Us Human?* (Oxford: One World), pp. 17–36.
15. Fatima Mernissi (1987), *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 41–5.
16. Lynn Welchman (ed.) (2004), *Women's Rights and Islamic Family Law: Perspectives on Reform* (New York: Zed Books).
17. Nawal El Saadawi (1974), *almar'a waljins* (Women and Sexuality) and *aluntha hiya alasl* (The Female is the Origin) (Beirut: al-mu'assasah al-'arabiyya l'ildirasat w'al nashr).
18. Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid (1999), *dawaer alkhawf: qira'a fi khitab almar'a* (Circles of Fear: A Reading in the Discourse of Women) (Beirut: al-markaz al-thakafi al-arabi), pp. 87–98.
19. Lisa See (2007), *Peony in Love* (New York: Random House), p. 15.
20. Fatimah Orzoweil (1996), *sowar nisa'iyah* (Images of Women) (Damascus: alahali l'il tiba'a w'al nashr w'al tawzi'), p. 159.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 163 (my translation).
22. Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity*, p. 411.

## CHAPTER 4

### Research Methods and Probing Feminist Thought\*

*Nahawand el Kadri Issa\*\**

#### **Manifestations of unintentional positioning in feminist thought**

I do not claim to be a feminist researcher, and I would not have researched feminism had my course of study not pushed me gradually in this direction through several stages.

##### *First stage: early research projects*

When I started work on my doctoral thesis, my professor suggested that I research the Lebanese feminist press based on his own interest in the specialized press. My response was quick: this is not a subject I am interested in. I am not a feminist and I know nothing about the subject. The only feminist book I had ever read was Nawal El Saadawi's novel *Women at Point Zero*, which left no significant impact on me at the time. However, my professor detected my innocence, if not my naiveté, and replied: to study various stages of the Lebanese feminist press all you need to do is follow a specific methodology. You should approach the subject from a well-rounded perspective: you have to look for the individuals behind these newspapers, what was written in them and who their readers were from a social, economic, cultural and political perspective. In other words, you should link the subject to the condition of the press on the one hand, and the condition of women on the other, in light of the prevailing atmosphere of the Arab Awakening at the turn of the twentieth century.

After he traced the course my research should follow, I agreed on the subject,<sup>1</sup> partly as a challenge, and partly out of a growing fascination with the subject. As I started working, the problems of the perplexed and bemused women started gradually taking shape. Who were they? What did they want? And how did they prove their existence? I began looking at the methods they used in their journalism to make themselves heard, and realized that this must have required an extraordinary effort on their part. In many cases, they had to compromise and adopt the point of view of men on certain matters, which made them face the constant challenge of their so-called conditional recognition.<sup>2</sup> This forced them to overreach themselves, and configure extraordinary roles for women.

After that, I wrote a research paper entitled ‘The problem of the renaissance in the Lebanese feminist press’ for a seminar held in Egypt under the aegis of the Women and Memory Forum, published later in a book entitled *The Women’s Era and Alternative Memory*.<sup>3</sup> It became clear to me that after all the hard work to draw a lofty image of a woman with extraordinary abilities, perfectly able to juggle the roles of mother, wife, female, intellectual, working woman, patriot and sacrificial lamb, free of any personal benefit or interest, the feminist press started shifting and changing as conditions and the market shifted and changed, settling finally at the bookseller’s doorstep. In other words, all the efforts exerted by the women of that period were thwarted by the work ethics of male journalists that depended on the economic requirements of competition and the marketplace.

In the second stage of my understanding of feminism, and in light of the increasing number of women in television and the generalizations and stereotyping surrounding this phenomenon, I undertook with Suad Harb a qualitative field study on men and women in television.<sup>4</sup> The study approached the subject from a combined gender-sociological-media perspective, using questionnaires and case studies as research tools, because it was necessary to look beyond the issue of gender disparities and try to study the position each sex occupies in the media industry, within a more comprehensive productive context. We succeeded thus in pinpointing a number of disparities due to a series of interconnected and complex factors.

What is noteworthy is that feminism was far from the minds of women in the media, women who had failed to hone their skills to suit the positions they occupied, and whose professional lives were plagued by a number of

disparities and complications. The existing feminist discourse had failed to teach them new working methods different from those currently prevailing, or provide answers to the dilemmas associated with the employment of women, its overlapping with their domestic responsibilities at home and the pressure that each of these areas puts on the other.

In my research on the development of a feminist discourse in Lebanese women's societies, which I undertook with Fadia Hoteit,<sup>5</sup> I found that the majority of women activists who consistently made demands of society were most often hostage to the agendas of international donor agencies and the concepts they propagated. These women never seemed to question the feminist thought to which they ascribed, or to crystallize a new feminist ideology in line with recent developments on the ground.

The third step in my understanding began when, while participating in a workshop in Egypt on academic research tools and current trends in research,<sup>6</sup> I noticed the striking absence of feminist thought, and its replacement by gender-based research, with no feminist questioning at all. This put male apprehensions to rest and relieved men from having to think about the development of new working tools that could be adapted to the needs and rights of women.

In a seminar held in Dubai on gender and economics,<sup>7</sup> male-oriented research dominated the work of the women researchers themselves, whereby research by both males and females focused on the means of adapting female fertility to market needs and economic activities, based on the never-ending assumption that the problem lies in the nature of women rather than in the nature of the marketplace. Feminist thinking that could have assumed otherwise, and that might have sought instead to adapt the marketplace and economic activity to female fertility, was completely absent, which made me realize the extent of the intellectual fear and internalization from which many women researchers suffer.

In my fourth stage of understanding feminist methodology, I wrote a report on the research published between 1995 and 2007 on women and the media, and women and the law.<sup>8</sup> This showed that research on the subject of women and the media was an entirely female field, and took me back to the stereotypical gender bias prevalent in Lebanese research circles, which demands that only women should research women.

Because of the quantitative nature of the research, its intellectual departure points were hostage to behavioural paradigms that see in the

media's impact on the public an almost magical effect. This is evident from the nature of the question posed: 'What effect does the media have on the public?'

Some of the research that I studied can be characterized as follows:

- The objectives were generalized.
- Women were researched separately from men, and outside the general context of the media, its interaction with the socio-cultural setup and without paying any attention to the laws that govern the media, or the relevant conventions and codes of behaviour.
- Problems were studied that bore no relationship with the stated objectives.
- The hypotheses were hostage to prejudice, stereotyping and hasty conclusions.
- The titles and subtitles of the studies had little to do with the introductions, contents and outcomes.

Some of the research made serious progress in terms of creating new tools and harmonizing between various sections of the studies.

Despite the progress made in the research on media addressed to women, whether produced by men or women, it is still beset by a series of problems that have either limited or prevented it from achieving real, qualitative progress in production. This is particularly true of the approach that gave rise to the issue of 'gender in the media and communications'. Among the obstacles I identified were:

- the absolutist manner in which assumptions were put forward;
- attempts to approach issues from a gender perspective eventually fell into the trap of covert stereotyping; and
- recommendations and proposals were left up in the air.

What was noteworthy in the research on women in advertising was that most of it dealt with the subject of stereotypical images, and with the value of the content of the advertisements, rather than with issues related to its production and use.

Based on the above, there seems to be a need for constructive qualitative gender-based approaches that would enable research to achieve real progress, by shifting its focus from 'women and the media' to 'gender in

the field of media and communications'. This would put it in step with the unexpected developments in the condition of men and women, as well as the conditions of society and the media.

As for the research on women and the law, what stood out was that men outshone women in analysing legal texts, while women outshone men in the variety of their research tools and methodologies, and especially in their use of face-to-face meetings and interviews. This could be due to the fact that men are content with their place in the legal setup, which was essentially created to suit their conditions and criteria. In the research undertaken by men, they used themselves as the yardstick and the basis of the law. Women, on the other hand, appear as though moving towards the creation of that yardstick, anxious and perplexed, searching for ways to guarantee that both they and their rights are recognized. Women seem to come up constantly against the conditionality of achieving recognition, which imposes on them the need to expand their research options.

Also clear were the multiple points of departure distributed among four main intellectual trends that stand behind the sample research:

- The first trend uses as its point of departure feminist activities, the societies behind them and the international organizations that support them. This translates into a legalistic approach committed to women's issues, one that follows up on these issues and seeks to expose areas of discrimination and injustice against women. It tries in a combative spirit to make recommendations and offer suggestions and solutions, and has recently tried to include the concept of gender in its approaches, even though it sometimes appears lacking and murky.
- The second trend involves efforts by lawyers of both sexes, working in the public sphere and devoted to human rights issues, who transcend demands and try to humanize laws by improving them, bringing them more into line with the preamble to the constitution, and closer to international conventions and treaties. Its legal point of departure is to view women as citizens and human beings.
- The third trend involves a group of men and women, but especially men, in the legal profession who approach the subject from a purely technical angle, without any recognition of gender bias or due consideration of the social, economic and cultural impact of discrimination against women. The trend comprises many avenues:

one of these deals with the law within a strictly legal framework, and thus within the theoretical context of the law and the current Lebanese political system. It deals with legal texts without considering the need to improve their political and social contents, and sees in its dealings with these only how they compare to international conventions and pacts.

- The fourth trend includes those researchers, both men and women, who approach the subject from socio-economic and cultural points of view, regardless of the law and its interaction with these.

Noteworthy is the absence in all this of a research track that assesses the law's interaction with social realities, and another that examines whether the culture of law is complementary to its role, objectives and technicalities.

Based on the above conclusions, there seemed to me a need for research that reinstates the idea of justice to legal research. I also perceived the need for research that relies on a constructive triangular approach involving gender, the law and sociology. I believed this should, however, go hand in hand with basic research that both crystallizes and questions existing concepts, and does not consider women's rights apart from those of men, but that regards them as citizens and human beings.

There is also need for research that does not regard a variable as if it were constant, or as if the law were stuck in the past – in other words, a kind of research that does not deal with the law as immutable. It should review laws within the context of the legal system, the legitimate brainchild of the Lebanese political-economic setup, and within a context of interaction with society and the economic and cultural changes affecting it, thanks to the accelerated technological and communications revolution.

## **In search of writing that is critical of feminism**

In the final analysis, what worried me the most about the research I had studied thus far was its potential result. At first, I was inclined to place almost the entire blame on feminism, which I felt was absent from the sample research as an intellectual reference point with its own concepts, methodologies and research systems. This compelled me to delve further into feminist thought and to search within it for unconventional approaches in research methodologies.



What I found most striking in what I read was the criticism of existing methodologies and research models, trying to lead them away from those long-established directions oriented towards male domination. These points of criticism were added on to those I had already arrived at in my own discoveries, which I described above. For want of space I shall refer to only a few thoughts that were new to me and struck me as important.

1. Virginia Held points out that feminists have raised a number of fundamental questions regarding the distinction between the public and the personal, showing how this distinction has given men control,<sup>9</sup> and demanding that values of caring and cooperation as the condition of women is examined be replaced by analysis of sexuality, class, race and ethnicity. As feminists see it, the ethics of care promotes attention to partialities and places matter into a context which is only guessed at; they understand narrative, contact and dialogue from within an ethical vision; they tend to believe that the more general and abstract the recommendation, the less is it able to serve as a guide.
2. Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid says that discussing women's issues without any consideration of the general social context and the role of the individual within it could trap one into talking about women in contrast to, and as an antithesis to, men. What he is saying, in other words, is that discussing women's issues outside a particular context is tantamount to the sin of talking in absolute terms about women, which requires – ipso facto according to the claim's own mechanism – comparing them with men. The entire discussion then enters into the context of absolute concepts of biological differences, and the ensuing – seemingly necessary and decisive – mental, intellectual and partisan differences. This is the general context in which the religious discourse usually evolves when discussing women's issues: in using the male as a basis of discussion, it makes him the focus of attention and the centre of gravity.<sup>10</sup>
3. Noha Bayoumi stresses the fact that presenting feminist studies as proof of the variety of feminist movements, their social interconnectedness and historic roots is an important step in moving women's studies forward. Added to that, there is a need to expand and change the definition of certain concepts, making them more amenable to ongoing reinterpretation and redefinition. She believes that we

cannot understand the status of women in our society, their relationship to the cultural, social, political and scientific contexts, their intersection with local and international events or the development of ideas, unless we adopt an approach based on overlapping sciences. This would require us to adopt a comprehensive vision rather than compartmentalize knowledge about ourselves and others, as French philosopher Edgar Morin demanded.<sup>11</sup>

4. Joseph Massad draws our attention to the imposition of interpretations regarding human relations on the entire world, particularly in the domain of development, by the United Nations and its agencies, which insist on applying them globally, and on reconfiguring the world in the image of Europe which they see as the only possible and viable model capable of bringing various forms of gender-based injustice to an end. In Massad's opinion, the trap into which this kind of research falls, namely research about gender in the Arab world, could be found in three different approaches: culturalism, comparativism and assimilationism; all of which act as cover for the supremacy of white, Christian European and American cultural and social values:

The only answers that different approaches have are those that they themselves begin with, because these answers do not pre-exist in society but are an outcome of a specific epistemology and systems of research. If we carry out such research, we would not be studying gender in the Arab world but producing ready-made answers configured by the very systems they claim to have invented.<sup>12</sup>

5. What is noteworthy is that writing by men and women about feminist thought and feminism goes in different directions: some see in El Saadawi and Mernissi a level of elitism and the reproduction of Orientalist concepts,<sup>13</sup> coupled with narcissism and media blitzes that attract and address the West, but have no attraction for the new generation.<sup>14</sup> Others started passing judgements, from a contemporary perspective, on the early leaders of the Awakening for their compromising attitudes, criticizing what they call '*hudashaarawi-ite*' feminism and its 'aristocratic' character,<sup>15</sup> blaming United Nations organizations for imposing ready-made concepts on our societies.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, some women approach the subject from a linguistic point of view,<sup>17</sup> or rewrite history from a feminine perspective.<sup>18</sup>

6. I found it noteworthy that some men approached their subjects from a feminist perspective without flaunting this feminism. The lawyer Nizar Saghiey did so when he discussed the letter from the Minister of the Interior to the Council of Ministers regarding the proposed draft law allowing Lebanese mothers to pass their nationality on to their children, and its relevant exception.<sup>19</sup>
7. When researching the internet using the phrase ‘criticism of feminist thought’, I found a site that mentioned Mona Abou al-Fadl as someone who tried to establish a universal discourse that deals with women’s issues from a civilized perspective. According to the site, it is an attempt to transcend the official narrative that condones the status quo and confirms the saying that Islam gave women their rights. It is also an attempt to transcend the discourse of Islamic jurisprudence that, though rife with details and partialities, fails to provide a comprehensive vision of women’s issues.<sup>20</sup>
8. Nahed Badawiya wrote an article entitled ‘Feminist thought questions philosophy and science’, in which she sheds light on Melissa Hine’s book *Brain Gender*, which tackles the relationship between feminist thought and science, epistemology and morality.<sup>21</sup>
9. Lina Qoura analyses currently prevailing ideas adopted by various political concepts, and poses the major question as to whether these can adequately express or analyse the issue of women’s political empowerment. A diligent review of written political history confirms that the nature of the problem, even if it exists, is limited to various types of classic political institutions and to the exercise of public power.<sup>22</sup> This assumption prompted a number of feminist thinkers to examine traditional political philosophy, and its methods, to see whether these can uncover the unseen or concealed roles that women play in public life. What helped crystallize and garner respect for this philosophical effort was the spread of a new notion that sees philosophy as each and every type of deep activity or critical thought. This has led to the appearance of two critical philosophical feminist trends: the first rejecting traditional philosophy as a masculine product that does not do justice to women; and the second dismissing the notion that philosophy is the enemy of women, and trying to understand philosophical texts in the historical, social, cultural and economic contexts that gave rise to them.

10. Wissam Rafidi<sup>23</sup> criticizes Arab feminist discourse, describes it as theoretically weak, and accuses it of borrowing what it wants from international studies and conventions and adding it to its own discourse, without any real effort to produce its own home-grown theories. It is a discourse that touches upon the fringes of religious culture to fight against what this culture produces regarding women, requiring it to engage in an intellectual acrobatic exercise: one religious verse vs. another, one textual explanation vs. another and one religious scholar vs. another. It is a pro-forma discourse that focuses on pro-forma issues that eventually become themselves its intellectual content, and nothing more.
11. Samir Shams reviews Jordanian researcher Khadija al-Uzaizi's<sup>24</sup> book *The Philosophical Bases of Arab Thought*, which seeks to uncover the level reached by Western thought in this domain and compare it to Arab thought. The latter is still, for the most part, hostage to personal one-sided views that see women as weak, persecuted and exploited, having failed to transcend the dual concepts of heritage and contemporariness, wavering between imitation and renewal. In light of this situation, we find that one way or another, more opportunities for women also mean more constraints, because trends that do not have a philosophical basis produce contradictory results. Despite its variety, Arab feminist discourse, whether produced by men or women, does not contain anything that one could describe as a philosophical discourse about women, or a philosophical basis with a certain measure of cohesiveness which is part of a political, educational, professional or family-based discourse.
12. On the issue of women's contribution to the development of school of thought, Hanan Ibrahim<sup>25</sup> points to the impact that Western women's intellectual products have had on the intellectual product of Arab women. The former thus cannot be addressed without taking into account the intellectual trends and other bases of knowledge prevailing in the Western world.
13. In another context, we find that writings about third-world feminism pose a challenge to Western dominance of the development of feminist thought, which tends always to ignore the expertise of ethnic groups from outside the Western cultural perspective.<sup>26</sup>

## **Just a deduction**

The systematic approach of studying any phenomenon, based on a set of principles, the most important of which is to approach it as a series of complex layers wrapped around one another, in constant interaction with and among each other, between itself and the whole that forms it, and among this whole and the wider milieu that contains it, which is the approach I myself followed in most of my studies, took me right to the heart of the problem. It made me feel inadequate each and every time, and pushed me to research the subject further, on the paradoxes that surround these social systems and on their logic. I found references to the dysfunction that besets the study sample similar to the problems I encountered during my research, dispersed here and there throughout the texts of different researchers whose writings on feminist thought I have had the chance to read.

In short, what I have concluded is that we researchers in the Arab world, both women and men, need constantly to review our research strategies, question theories and concepts, and adopt qualitative approaches that deal with complex and varied phenomena, put them in their proper context and use the research tools best suited for that end. We also need to adopt complex systems and couple field activities with theoretical exercises and vice versa, and may also need more interaction among each other and among our different expertises. We need to shed all generalizations, prejudgements and notions alien to our environment, and not deal with suppositions as if they are givens or view phenomena as if they are one, wholesome and homogenous.

In other words, we need to be patient, unhurried researchers, and allow our thoughts to ripen. Only then will feminist thought mature, gather supporters among men and women and find its natural place in the intellectual world.

## **Notes**

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Lebanese University, Bahithat.

1. Nahawand el Kadri Issa, 'Contribution to the study of the Lebanese feminine press', doctoral thesis under the tutorship of Pierre Albert, Paris 2, 1989.

2. Without passing judgement on the Women's Awakening of that period, so far as both journalism and societies are concerned, and without lauding or downplaying women's achievements, we find between the lines of women's writing the bases on which the Lebanese women's movement was founded, through the roles they drew for themselves based on their experience and conditions. This role involves an idealistic view of the following:

- women as saints with extraordinary abilities;
- politics, which they saw as a hub of tolerance, free of conflict, rivalry and personal interests;
- work, which they wanted free of personal benefit and office politics; and • equality, which they thought could be achieved without having to wrest it from someone else's control.

Furthermore, this was restricted to a small group that revolves around itself, limited to the city and plagued by sectarianism, family feuds, politics, and social and economic concerns. See: Nahawand el Kadri Issa, 'Lebanese women's journalism and societies in the 1920s: two faces of the same coin', paper presented at the conference entitled 'Arab Women in the 1920s – Presence and Identity' (Arabic), Beirut: Association of Lebanese Women Researchers (al-Bahithat al-Lubnanyat), the Arab Cultural Centre.

3. Nahawand el Kadri Issa (1998), 'The awakening in the Lebanese feminist press, the era of women and alternative memory' (Arabic) (Cairo: Women and Memory Group).

4. See Nahawand el Kadri Issa and Suad Harb (2002), 'Men and women in television – research on roles and positions' (Arabic), Association of Lebanese Women Researchers (Bahithat) (Beirut: Arab Cultural Centre).

5. Fadia Hoteit and Nahawand el Kadri Issa, 'Women's societies' discourse – a round table', *Women in the Contemporary Arab Narrative* (Arabic), *Bahithat* (Journal of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 9 (Beirut: Arab Cultural Centre).

6. *Knowledge Production in the Arab World*, a workshop organized by the Arab World Centre for Advanced Studies in Great Britain and the Higher Cultural Council, 2–4 July 2007; Cairo, headquarters of the Higher Cultural Council.

7. *Gender and Economics in the Middle East and North Africa: from Theories to Policies*, Dubai, 16–18 November 2008; organized by the Dubai School of Government in cooperation with the Arab Women's Centre for Research and Training (KAWTHER) and the World Bank.

8. Analytical assessment of a research sample on 'Women and the media' and 'Women and the law' (Arabic), as part of the *National Sectoral Project on Gender*, issued by the Hariri Foundation, the World Bank and the Construction and Development Council, prepared by Nahawand el Kadri Issa, Beirut, 2009.

9. Virginia Held, 'The ethics of care', translated by Michel Hanna Mathias, *Aalam al-Ma'rifa*, 356 (October 2008).

10. Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid (2004), *Circles of Fear: An Evaluation of Women's Discourse* (Arabic) (Beirut: Arab Cultural Centre), third edition, pp. 79–80.

11. The book of research and studies presented at the International Conference on Women, Science and Development (Arabic), Aden, 4–6 February 2006, Part One, edited and reviewed by Roxana Ismail and Yaacoub Kassem, study by Noha Bayoumi, the Researcher and Research in Feminism.

12. Joseph Massad, 'How not to study gender in the Arab world', *Religious Reform in the Arab Muslim World*, 7–8 July 2009, Year 57.

13. Writings by Mernissi that are contemporary to Shaarawi's used Western academic language in the study of women in the Arab and Muslim world. Both authors addressed an Arab audience via research that criticizes Western concepts, but at the same time reproduces European Orientalist and epistemological generalizations that focus on the analysis of Arab Muslim societies, which Mernissi very often reduces to a single entity. See Massad, 'How not to study gender in the Arab world'.

14. Mohammad Sh'eer, 'The Arab feminist pioneer in the new generations' eyes: "the woman and sex" against whom conservative and progressive movements have united' (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 7 March 2009.

15. Asaad abu-Khalil, 'The Arab woman: remarks on feminist issues' (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 1 August 2009.

16. Proponents of what we call in our region 'women's empowerment' talk about the situation of women as if there is a Western transferable model. Field studies indicate that there is no such model, neither East nor West. One of the most recent studies on domestic violence in the United States shows numbers similar to those of the comprehensive study carried out two years ago by the United Nations in Syria; see, for example, Abu-Khalil, 'The Arab woman – remarks on feminist issues' (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 1 August 2009.

17. The term 'We inherited a tarnished language', uttered by Julia Kristeva, was borrowed by Zuleikha abu-Risha in her book *Woman of the Language* (Arabic) (Damascus: Ninawa Publishing) to address language from an opposite angle, since it was a masculine language par excellence. Abu-Risha's book *The Absent Language* (1996) was a first attempt at approaching feminist theory, and she is now completing her project by challenging the masculine language and its power drawn from a sacred language. The issue of this text has become akin to cursing – as she, herself, says – meaning that any attempt at rejecting the restrictions it imposes is considered taboo territory. Is woman's voice not a religious taboo ('*awra*') in itself? What would one say then about her personal and independent discourse? See Khalil Sweileh and Zuleikha abu-Risha, 'An absent article that referring to "she"' (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 2 June 2009.

18. 'When I got to know social history from a woman's perspective I was completely taken. I found a particular intersection between the change that this course allows, where history could be rewritten from women's perspective and thus the opportunity to undo exiting values, and literary criticism that allows indirect socio-political change by shaking and destabilising established beliefs and ready-made ideologies': Ahmad al-Zaatari, Feiha' Abdul-Hadi, 'History from a woman's perspective' (Arabic), *al-Akhbar*, 20 May 2009.

19. Nizar Saghiyeh, 'When motherhood became just a ruse!', *al-Akhbar*, 1 July 2009.

20. Amani Saleh, Mouna abu al-Fadl, 'Stages of the intellectual project: Mouna abu al-Fadl and the civilised foundation of feminist philosophy', 23 September 2009, [www.bilblioislam.net](http://www.bilblioislam.net), site no longer working.

21. Nahed Badawiya, 'Feminist thought questions philosophy and science', [www.assuaal.net](http://www.assuaal.net), published by Rami Khader, 23 September 2009.

22. 'The Arab woman and political participation', working papers, 23 September 2009, [www.awapp.org](http://www.awapp.org), accessed 29 July 2013.

23. Wissam Rafid, 'The intellectual discourse of non-governmental organisations (helping women accede to decision-making positions as example)' (Arabic), excerpt from the site Ajras al-'Awda, 1 September 2008, [www.albadil.net](http://www.albadil.net), accessed 22 September 2009.

24. Samir Shams, 'More opportunities for women means more constraints' (Arabic), *al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 31 August 2005, [www.aawsat.com](http://www.aawsat.com), accessed 22 September 2009.

25. Hanan Ibrahim, 'Women's contribution to the development of schools of thought' (Arabic), from the site muntadayat manaber al-thaqafa, [www.m.ahewar.org](http://www.m.ahewar.org), accessed 22 September 2009, and [www.kau.edu.sa](http://www.kau.edu.sa), accessed 27 December 2005.

26. Some feminist thinkers, like Gayatri Spivak, Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Sheila Sandoval, criticize Western feminist thinkers for allowing themselves to interfere in cultural issues that do not concern them. For example, in her book *Under Western Eyes* (1991), Chandra Talpade Mohanty criticizes the summary way in which ordinary Third World women are portrayed in Western feminist discourse. For her part, Gayatri Spivak coins the concept of the 'dependence' to explain the process through which first world writings address non-Western women, who are supposed to stay quiet and passive (and inherently grateful) as recipients of Western thought that always ignores the strategies

conceived by third world women to help them stand up to the injustice they suffer. See 'Feminist terminology: the third wave', 15 July 2007, [www.annabaa.org](http://www.annabaa.org), accessed 21 September 2009.



## CHAPTER 5

# From Women's Rights to Feminism: The Urgent Need for an Arab Feminist Renaissance\*

*Zeina Zaatari\*\**

This chapter proposes the need to establish Arab feminist movements with ample room for internal dialogue, criticism and objection, provided they share specific objectives that target comprehensive social change in all the institutions of society. We also need to undertake a general assessment of the current condition of women's rights and the development of women's and feminist movements in the Arab world, and their ability to forge a theoretical and practical path to equality and freedom. Based on this, the chapter takes the framework of an internal dialogue that hopes to be a constructive critique from within rather than outside these movements. Although I address the theoretical or intellectual situation and its importance in building movements, I focus more on the movements themselves with their particularities and daily practices. I address the problematics of women or womanist vs. feminist movements in our region in general, and then expound on a subject I believe the women's movement has so far failed to address in a satisfactory manner. This is our relationship with our body and sex, a domain in which, in my opinion, a feminist movement could achieve considerable progress.

### **Feminism, women's activism and human rights strategies**

We may not be able to say for sure that there exists today a solid freestanding Arab women's movement; the most we can say would probably be that the political and conceptual progress we have known from the beginning of the twentieth century, and up to the 1970s, has begun to

retreat, ending up today in a multitude of national and class-specific movements. Moreover, although the plurality of concepts and movements is not necessarily in itself detrimental to change, the absence of complementarity and connectivity diminishes the chance that these movements will one day turn into popular, radical movements for change, since plurality can lead to disunity and weakness. Despite its early beginnings as a popular social movement that bore within it the seeds of social change, the women's movement has today become a rights movement that relies increasingly on international agreements and strategies of appeal, instead of popular mobilization, and the establishment of new and different frameworks and institutions. In its early beginnings, the women's movement centred on two basic issues at the national and regional levels, the first being the overarching and fundamental fight against colonialism, foreign mandates and occupations. The objectives of these struggles were to destroy the existing balance of power among various elements, including that between the colonizers and those local politicians who were their supporters. The women's movement was an essential part of this struggle, and gave women the chance to participate in domains that had not necessarily been open to them before.<sup>1</sup> I am referring here to women as a social group rather than those few who had the opportunity to appear openly in public, take part in public life and receive an education, as some women did in the middle and end of the nineteenth century.

Women formed at that time a parallel movement that aimed at changing the system by launching a wide effort of social mobilization. Some studies show that women were used by the national movements for the purpose of expanding their bases of support, without proposing any comprehensive programme to change the patriarchal criteria of society. Based on my study of South Lebanon and feminist activists of the generation that participated in Arab liberation movements, I came to the conclusion that although women did join these movements and adopt their political slogans, they were not able to delineate clear frameworks for feminist activism from within these movements. This, in addition to the post-liberation governments' failure to establish democracy, is one of the main reasons why many women left these political formations and were compelled to establish feminist movements outside the framework of any political party. Regardless of the results, however, a large number of women who were once active in liberation movements worked hard to advance feminist issues

such as political participation, equality with men, the right to health and education, and other areas in which discrimination against women were rife.

The second matter around which the women's movement rallied was modernity in its many aspects. Modernity is not necessarily a uniquely Western concept, as is often believed. The modernity movement in Turkey (at the end of the Ottoman era) played an important role in developing the concept of the individual as a productive and educated citizen,<sup>2</sup> just as difficult local conditions played a role in the search for different means of society-building. The modernization projects accompanied movements for the rejection of European colonization. The feminist movements thus saw the need to create a new woman to take as active part in building a state that would create its own identity and that would be independent. Just like the efforts to end occupation, modernization efforts aimed to change the balance of power in society in order to pave the way for the individual citizen and for international laws. However, like other social currents, it soon adhered to the human rights framework as manifested internationally at that time, through the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This strengthened the movement linking human rights with citizenship.

As far as the Arab world was concerned, the paradox was that the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed in the same year that the majority of Palestinians were deprived of these rights. Unfortunately, over the years, the paradoxes continued unabated. On the one hand, and on account of this poor beginning and its perpetuation, year after year, these international frameworks did not garner much credibility in the region. On the other hand, due to their international character, they did and do enjoy a certain level of social credibility and legitimacy, and have today become the main tools of the women's rights struggle for change. When actors are lured by the strategies of appealing for rights only, movements lose a big part of their popular power for change. Moreover, if we accept the premise that the principle of rights is not itself the problem, but rather the absence of implementation, then all the proposed frameworks to achieve rights have so far failed to bring about radical and permanent change in the Arab world.

The call for rights, however, did succeed in effecting a number of temporary changes and marking some initial progress in the daily lives of some people, though women are still not respected enough in most of the

world, and patriarchal systems are still ferocious. Human rights could well address issues that are now elementary and accepted by everyone, namely that all human beings have the right to live, be educated, work and enjoy those essentials that bring a degree of satisfaction to their lives. What it does not adequately delineate, however, as many intellectuals have pointed out, is the dividing line between individual and collective rights, and individual and group formation.<sup>3</sup> It has also failed to explain adequately the boundaries between the rights of one individual and another.

Since for most people in the world the field on which they play out their lives is by no means a level one, the question then becomes: Is it possible to achieve equality without forcing anyone to relinquish their privileges (which they might call rights), and how do we set our priorities and mobilize the public to bring pressure to bear? The segmentation of rights that began as a strategy has now become the basis of demands and advocacy. It starts by specifying priorities as though there were a hierarchical order of basic and secondary rights, as well as tertiary rights that we might consider recreational. What we forget, or pretend to forget, in this generalization is that freedom and rights are indivisible and that all rights are intimately linked to one another. The right to education is linked to the right to have a job and enjoy good health, and the right to live in security is linked to economic, physical and sexual rights, and so on. How can we create a plan of action that can balance between what can be worked on and achieved at a given point in time, and these basic principles?

In my opinion, one of the most significant problematics in the human rights framework is the question of how to demand these rights, particularly the frameworks and programmes that international organizations, including the United Nations, have agreed upon, and proposed mechanisms and action plans for. I believe that asking for a certain right serves to institutionalize and strengthen the position of those to whom one is appealing, be it the state and its institutions, the international community or simply the community of men. I am of course not dismissing the importance of amending laws and utilizing these international mechanisms as strategies to pressure governments into enacting laws that combat discrimination and protect women against unfair and outdated practices. What I do believe, however, is that these should remain temporary strategies to be used when and if necessary, and should not become themselves the objective of our endeavours. The fact that they are strategies

means that they are mere tools, and should change with time because they are both limited and specific to particular issues. We should not forget that shadow reports designed to embarrass our countries internationally, and compel them to carry out their responsibilities towards their citizens, have become in the current political-economic era (in the shadow of the globalization of war and in the presence of repressive regimes) less effective as a strategy than would have been if the United Nations had the real ability to enforce and sanction, without applying double standards. In other words, the UN is not a neutral entity, but heavily immersed in geopolitical structures and power games. Compelling governments to treat their citizens fairly is more possible through popular mobilization, and in the context of genuine democratic systems. When we ask for a certain right, we assume that those we are appealing to have the power to grant us what we want, and thus we do not try to wrest power from them, but at best try to acquire a share of it. Therein lies the difference between the calls for reform by the women's movements, and the feminist call for change.

As an ideology of change, feminism seeks to overthrow the entire patriarchal or paternal system by overturning the balance of power that prioritizes men as a social group and those who benefit from the patriarchal system. In the Arab world as elsewhere, this system gives priority to older people and the richer classes, based on shared interests and the conversion of systems of oppression. I therefore agree with those who say that, in its effort to make women's voices heard, feminist thought radically reconsider all current social structures in light of the various societal, cultural, class, and knowledge norms. The feminist movement and its ideology would thus dismantle all existing patriarchal institutions in society – including state, religious, economic, traditional, sexual and otherwise – recreating them as institutions entirely infused with the culture of equality, and generating policies and tools that promote equality in all legal and social frameworks. Within this context, demanding certain rights becomes a useful strategy for a limited period, with a limited objective, dictated by this transformative project.

We often hear in the discourse of women activists that 'men should be the ones to call for women's rights because that would not detract from their rights and position in society, and if women were to enjoy their full rights, men's lives would be considerably improved'. It is as though we are not allowed to call solely for women's rights, but have always to prove that the

family, society and the nation at large would be better off if the condition of women were to improve. At the end of the day, women are still not human beings – that is, we do not ask for their rights as human beings, but as mothers, sisters, wives and partners in society and the nation, always linked to men in some way, lest men might think that we intend to dispense with their role or that we, God forbid, could survive without them.

An apologetic discourse used by some women is ‘We are not against men’, having continuously to demonstrate to men that their value is not to be undermined by our actions, and placing women in a defensive position. These defensive and apologetic attitudes mask or conveniently forget that the struggle towards equality is bound to de-stabilize the privileges that men have accrued over years of patriarchy. We also often hear these women say, in an undertone of apology to men, that it was men, whether as fathers or husbands, who made it possible for them to be active, well-educated and so on. In this there is a confirmation of the importance of the tolerant man’s role and the individualistic nature of change. The women who make these claims forget to thank the thousands of women activists who preceded them, broke the barriers, and allowed them to vote, receive an education and work.

Why is there this constant fear of encroaching on the patriarchal system’s authority if we are precisely trying to do away with it? We are indeed in a struggle against it, while we may not be in a struggle against individual men. The patriarchal system does accord men many privileges while still being varied by class, race and other social factors. Feminists do not apologize for the radical changes they wish to see effected, and recognize that achieving equality between the sexes is not possible without men losing their privileges.

Today, we see women activists deeply mired in a struggle to protect the few gains achieved through pleas, demands and mobilization. For example, campaigns are underway in Jordan to discredit the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and those who call for withdrawing the reservations on it, by describing them as Westernized and anti-religious. This places women activists on the defensive: in their attempt to prove that CEDAW does not contradict religion, they are forced into making religious arguments of which they themselves are not always entirely convinced. They regard these religious responses as necessary because of the religious revival that is presently

wielding power in the region. Women's rights activists in the region have generally had more secular underpinnings than the majority of the population today in the Arab region. Unlike most of the activists, most probably believe that religion regulates social matters, in which case CEDAW does indeed contradict religious prescriptions (whether Christian, Muslim or Jewish), and in particular its patriarchal institutions, interpretations, laws and principles.

## **Body and sex**

I would like to focus here on a number of important points that clearly demonstrate the failure of the women's movement, which demands legal reform while ignoring other important issues, such as bringing about a change in the relationship of women to their bodies. It is not a secret that the radical feminist and leftist discourses are not popular at the present historical junction. All the right-wing institutions, whether religious/*salafist* or neoliberal, have mastered the language of change, as well as the language of rights and so-called democracy, and have used it to further the exploitation of women and the marginalized. But does this mean that we should alter our discourse in order to make it more popularly acceptable? And if we wish to begin a dialogue, what do we need to say to those who oppose us?

Moreover, what would compel the public to listen to, and engage in, a dialogue with feminist thought, especially since (as I see it) its features are at worst unclear and at best inconsistent? One moment we call for justice without defining it, and at another we call for equity instead of equality, since some of us believe in 'natural' differences between men and women, and thus view the role of women as complementary to the role of men. On the one hand, we seem incapable of delineating a specific framework for feminist thought, and using it as a launching pad towards the establishment of a political movement that can challenge the patriarchal system, and the growing influence, both popular and political, of religious thought, which proclaims the slogan 'Islam is the solution'. On the other hand, at a time when the struggle against occupation, imperialism and repressive regimes is increasingly based in a religious discourse and agenda, it has become all too easy to accuse the discourses of activism and individual activists as

Westernized and unauthentic, making it easy to sideline and ignore voices calling for radical change.

One of the often-used methods to alienate the other and refuse to engage in a dialogue is to describe any call for change as 'Westernized', as aiding and abetting imperialism, and as insensitive to our culture and traditions. It is as though our culture, customs and traditions are impervious to change, cast in stone, and not living notions and practices that change with time. It is also as if those who make these accusations never demanded change themselves. In contrast, many of the same activists have historically been demanding changes in cultural practices and new explanations of religious text. However, demands for more radical change are often silenced. In fact, this accusation is a way to marginalize the other and avoiding engagement in a real dialogue on these issues. Those who defend cultural specificity thus appoint themselves the arbiters of which rights are permitted and which are not; as such, they become the defenders of a patriarchal system that reinforces their repressive authority, which annuls the rights of others.

In my opinion, the women's movement has historically not been able to challenge and create new social structures adequately, especially those that are still taboo on account of their close association with religion, customs, traditions and our entire cultural heritage; nor do I believe the movement will be able to do so in the future within an advocacy/human rights framework only. When members of the women's movements speak about marriage as one of the social structures that regulate sexual relations and, in the more traditional sense, family production (progeny and economic production), they might speak about the need to change the law in order to grant women the right to obtain a divorce; they might also speak about the required minimum age for marriage, and other issues, such as custody and inheritance. These are all important issues, but they will not destabilize social power structures. They fail to address the historical plurality of marriage institutions in our part of the world, which many studies have found. They fail to question why marriage is necessary to regulate sexual and reproductive relations; they do not propose alternative arrangements to regulate them or explain why they need to be regulated at all. This means that what constitutes our 'customs' and 'traditions' continues to be unitary, created by people whose power emanates from a particular religious-patriarchal system.



They also fail mostly to address issues related to women's relationship with their bodies, their sexual freedom, and reproductive choices. When I asked women activists about the need to address these issues, the answer was that there were more important priorities: 'It is useless to talk about sexual freedom with women in refugee camps who have nothing to eat and are struggling to stay alive.' It is as if placing this topic on the women's agenda is tantamount to calling for the annulment of other issues that have to do with the right to life, work and to live with dignity. But women in refugee camps do engage in sexual relations; they marry, have children, and see these as important and essential aspects of their lives. They may be having sexual relations without pleasure; they may be forced to have sex; they may be raped but do not recognize the difference between conjugal duty and rape; they may look at their bodies as alien instruments that belong not to them but to their husbands; they may feel attracted to their female neighbour but think that they are possessed by the devil for having such feelings; and they may not have the power to decide when to have children, how many to have or whether to have any at all.

Public discourses about the body or sex often only refer to these as sources of pain, or harm. We speak about female circumcision, domestic and physical violence, rape, cosmetic surgery, menstrual pain and menopause (all subjects that were once taboo and remain so in certain regions). Though poets and novelists have written about the issue, we rarely speak publicly and seriously about the body as a source of pleasure, inspiration or as the location of choice. Moreover, in most cases, including poems and novels, the body remains an instrument at the service of men, not women. We may speak about pregnancy and the pain of childbirth, but not about women's right not to have children, or about the availability of various kinds of birth control, or the absolute right to abortion.

In my opinion, there is a serious need to question those beliefs and join those feminist movements around the world, not just in the West, but also in the global South and the East, which are placing them on their agendas and seeking to change. Since we have succeeded in questioning other inherited notions regarding the role of women in society, and in breaching the taboos surrounding violence and the like, what prevents us from questioning in the future other beliefs that impact women's lives considerably? It appears that the women's movement forgets that there are sexual and bodily rights, in addition to economic and political rights, and that there is discrimination in

our society against sexual minorities like gays and lesbians. The discrimination inherent in our laws and society forces many women to live a double life – if, that is, they succeed at all in accepting themselves, being different from what society considers ‘normal’ in sexual and romantic relationships. These normative thoughts and practices dictate what is socially acceptable and what society and religions view as normal, imposing many social restrictions on both men and women, to differing degrees.

When laws are written according to the prevalent social customs, the fate of those who dare defy them is often alienation from family and society, harassment and humiliation, and at worst violence, murder or imprisonment. For example, society and religion say that a girl has to remain a virgin until her wedding day, and impose several criteria to ensure that this remains the case. Her freedom of movement is limited; she is kept under close surveillance by her family. Others decide who her friends should be, how she should dress and what she should say – all in the interest of ‘safeguarding’ her reputation. Punishment for not following the rules can be severe, including so-called honour killing, particularly as the law in most of the Arab world still reduces the sentence for those who are said to have ‘cleansed’ the family’s ‘honour’. A woman’s body belongs to the entire family. There are even certain beauty criteria that specify, for example, how a woman should look. In Lebanon, women and girls should be thin; their hair should be perfectly coiffed, their faces fully made-up; cosmetic surgery may be prescribed, and their gait should be perfectly adapted to their high heels, etc. Any girl whose personality or forms of identity are different from these standards becomes the object of derision, disrespect and daily psychological pressure. Moreover, if a lesbian wears clothes that society considers too masculine, or cuts her hair too short, the harassment she endures can affect her life both in society and the workplace, sometimes even limiting her chances of finding a place to live, or employment opportunities, regardless of her abilities.

Many women activists forget that we do not have a sexual culture that allows women and young girls to have a healthy relationship with their bodies, or find in it a source of strength and pleasure rather than constant shame. We forget that many women resort to surgery to restore their virginity, while others are killed on the mere suspicion that they are having an extramarital relationship, or thrown out onto the streets and alienated

from their families for daring to admit that they love another woman and want her for a partner. On the other hand, there is an available and publicly acceptable and encouraged sexual culture for men. Whenever women activists address the sexual culture that men enjoy, they often focus their attention on and criticize sex workers without proposing relevant programmes targeting men. In this context, women activists are not different from their religious and *salafist* sisters, as most seem to ban, prohibit and reject many things related to their bodies. In our societies, young women learn that their bodies, their secretions and changes are sources of shame, or that they are tools for abuse. Those in a weaker position are constantly on the lookout for ways to get what they want by unorthodox means. Women are often described as cunning, wily and spoilt. We rarely attribute these 'characteristics' to the stereotypical images that confine men and women to specific modes of behaviour when dealing and interacting with each other. A well-developed feminist movement can breach the wall surrounding what is acceptable to society, and liberate both men and women from these shackles.

A feminist thought that seeks to destroy the patriarchal systems in conjunction with the political, religious, economic and sectarian structures could provide the opportunity to address all these sexual, bodily, economic and identity issues (that many call human rights). The aim is to found a nucleus that, though it might not result in a comprehensive movement in the short term, would give us more credibility with ourselves and our aspirations, and thus have a greater chance of effecting change in the long run. It is necessary to forge a third path that aims radically to reconsider all current social structures in light of social, class, cultural and knowledge conditions, and recreate them in an improved form. Feminist thought is capable of forging this third path by placing the feminist project and the cause of women at the heart of the existential dilemmas, rather than outside them.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Global Fund for Women, San Francisco, CA.

1. Several sources could be consulted on the participation of women in liberation movements in Lebanon, Algeria, Egypt and Palestine. See Beth Baron (1993), 'The construction of national honour in Egypt', *Gender and History* 5(2), pp. 244–55 and (2005), *Egypt as a Woman: Nationalism, Gender and Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Joseph Suad and Susan Slyomovics (eds)

(2001), *Women and Power in the Middle East* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); Julie Peteet (1991), *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press) and (1997), 'Icons and militants: mothering in the danger zone', *SIGNS* 23(1), pp. 103–29; Lisa Pollard (2005), *Nurturing the Nation: The Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press); Zeina Zaatari (2003), *Women Activists of South Lebanon*, Dissertation, University of California at Davis and (2006), 'The culture of motherhood: an avenue for women's civil participation in South Lebanon', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 2(1), pp. 33–64; Amal Amireh (2003), 'Between complicity and subversion: body politics in Palestinian national narrative', *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 102(4), pp. 747–72; Eileen Kuttab (2004), *Social and Economic Situation of Palestinian Women: 1990–2003* (Beirut, Lebanon: UN ESCWA); Eileen Kuttab and Riham Bargouti (2002), *The Impact of Armed Conflict on Palestinian Women* (New York: UNIFEM); Eileen Kuttab and N Abu Awwad (2004), 'Palestinian women's movement: problems and dialectic issues', *Review of Women Studies* 2 (in Arabic); Thoraya Antonios (1979), 'Fighting on two fronts: conversations with Palestinian women', *Journal of Palestine Studies* 8(3), pp. 2–45; Caroline Sakina de la Brac Perière (2005), 'Algeria country report', in *Women's Rights in the Middle East and North Africa: Citizenship and Justice* (New York: Freedom House, Inc and Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc); Marnia Lazreg (2000), 'Citizenship and gender in Algeria', in Joseph Suad (ed.), *Gender and Citizenship in the Middle East* (New York: Syracuse University Press); Susan Slyomovics (1996), 'Hassiba Ben Bouali, if you could see our Algeria: women and public space in Algeria', in S. Sabbagh (ed.), *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (New York: Olive Branch Press), pp. 211–20; and Allison Baker (1998), *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (New York: State University of New York Press). Liberation movements allowed women to access domains that were not necessarily acceptable to society regardless of whether we believe that they were used by the resistance fighters, or that joining these movements and being part of the struggle did not change these systems from patriarchal to liberal.

2. For a history of these movements from a feminist perspective, see Deniz Kandiyoti (1988), 'Bargaining with patriarchy', *Gender and Society* 2(3), pp. 274–90 and (1996) (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East: Emerging Perspectives* (London: I.B.Tauris Publishers); Yasin Arat (1996), 'On gender and citizenship in Turkey', *Middle East Report* (198), pp. 28–31 and (1998), 'Feminists, Islamists, and political change in Turkey', *Political Psychology* 19(1), pp. 117–31.

3. For different texts on human rights, cultural particularities and human rights issues seen from the tribal and group perspective, see J. S. Peters and Andrea Wolper (eds) (1994), *Women's Rights, Human Rights: International Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Routledge); Rebecca Cook (ed.) (1994), *Human Rights of Women: National and International Perspectives* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press); and Abdullah al-Na'im (1995), *Human Rights in Cross-Cultural Perspectives: A Quest for Consensus* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press).

## CHAPTER 6

### Feminist Discourse in the Arab Theatre\*

*Watfa Hamadi\*\**

#### **Introduction**

Arab women have recently assumed a leadership role in the arts, particularly in writing and directing for the theatre, cinema and television. This role has allowed them to negate the inferred notion, propagated by a male culture, that the biological nature of women limits and restricts their thoughts, creativity and behaviour, thus compelling men to express themselves on behalf of women. The change in cultural behaviour has allowed creative women to reject men's expression on their behalf, and rendered all the more acute their desire to openly resist and respond to this unwelcome authority. Their theatrical creativity has become an expression of their ability to function without a 'mandate'.<sup>1</sup>

Thus the genealogical method called for by Nietzsche, who put forth a comprehensive proposal that might end the marginalization of women, has become all the more inevitable.<sup>2</sup> This will enable a woman to become her true self in the face of the predominant culture, and propose patterns of behaviour that can move towards change.

The new female writers and directors are modern, rebellious, daring and inventive, and their work helps embody the artistic identity of women, and their concept of the self, without needing anyone to speak on their behalf. It is worth noting that this artistic vision does not necessarily have to be feminist in nature. Feminism is not achieved only through feminist theatre, but through institutions, policies and ideas that women themselves create and promote, as well as through words and qualifications that they help propagate; all these together form an important part of the base that

underlies the feminist movement. It is also achieved through a woman director's personal vision: first of all as a woman with no need for theatrical feminist slogans; second as a creative individual with a vision that sets her apart from other directors and male-oriented visions. It is not that far-fetched for this vision to embrace the women's cause as well, which the director presents in two different forms: the feminist theatre and the theatre in its current structure.

Given these two perspectives – that is, distinguishing feminist theatre from one that merely showcases women's issues – we ask ourselves about the particular characteristics of the Arab woman playwright and director most often referred to on the basis of her sexual identity. We also ask ourselves about the issue of self-representation in a cultural and political context rife with the production and consumption of representative subjectivities, linked to the here and now of the material environment, and even to the very place where the artist lives.<sup>3</sup>

This study addresses the problems arising from these questions, and probes the theoretical and practical assumptions underlying the director's personal vision. It critically examines its foundations, the sustainability of the impact of injecting feminist thought into the theatre and the extent to which it contributes to advancing women's work in that particular domain. I have chosen a descriptive approach to analyse a number of noticeable visions in the manner women compose their texts and direct their plays, which could be described as feminist, to arrive at certain conclusions regarding these visions as a step towards understanding and analysing feminist identity in the theatre.

To this end, I turned to the experience of three women directors and their plays, namely *nissa' lorka* (Lorca's Women), by Iraqi director Awatef Naim, *musaba bil wuduh* (Afflicted by Clarity) by Jordanian director Sawsan Darwaza and *'ilbit almusiqqa* (The Music Box) by the young Lebanese playwright and director Maya Zabib. Because each of these three experiences represents a stage in theatrical development, they allow us to find out how feminist thought was handed down in the theatre from past to present generations. Examining the work of Maya Zabib also allows us to monitor the new generation's theatrical discourse, and discover the differences and similarities in the themes, artistic structures and aesthetics of three generations of women playwrights.

## **Themes of the dramatic discourse in the three texts, and the impact of feminism on them**

In various parts of their texts, the playwright-directors highlight the conditions and circumstances of women from a feminist perspective that seeks to criticize existing social structures. Each tries to establish her own personal theatrical structure through representative feminine roles, and by paying special attention to social roles based on gender stereotypes, discovering the nature of the world of women, and urging that the issue of gender be turned into a political cause.<sup>4</sup>

Awatef Naim wove Lorca's Women out of four Lorca plays – *Yerma*, *Blood Wedding*, *The House of Bernarda Alba* and *Mariana Pineda* – borrowing and then moulding a number of female characters to suit her chosen theme. For the performance of her play, she entrusted the roles of Yerma, Bernarda, the bride Adela, Marianna, and Magdalena to five Iraqi actresses – including herself. Lorca's plays are usually rife with female characters that embody aspects of the lives of women: suffering, pain, marriage, love and motherhood, to name just a few. Lorca is one of those dramatist-poets who portrayed women's condition in depth, basing himself on the belief that the worst punishment a woman could endure is having been born a woman.

In *Afflicted by Clarity*, Sawsan Darwaza chose to let go of, and reveal, all that is repressed within her characters, using escalating events in parallel with the escalating character development. Though Salma is an Arab woman, she could just as well represent Western women. She is the woman as a human being who, in an instant of pure clarity, sees the contradictions within herself, and between herself and the conditions of her local community, as well as the larger, international community. A submissive and obedient woman at home, she then lives moments in which the private and public come together. She wishes to see the social hypocrisy and political lies that she perceives come to an end. In her moment of clarity, she rebels against herself and announces: 'Today, I decided to be me. The time has come for me to be able to say No to anything.'<sup>5</sup>

In *The Music Box*, Maya Zabib's theme is inspired by women's everyday stories and their relationship with their homes. She sees home as a place which shelters a variety of rituals and inherited customs, as well as pain,

hopes and dreams. The characters in the play have no names, as the author wishes through them to represent a generality of women, rather than a particular woman. She weaves her text around her belief that women's relationship to their home is different from men's. Every woman in the play has some sort of obsession about her home, whether big or small; for example, one woman places candles everywhere in her house, while another keeps her letters in a special drawer to rekindle her relationship with memory.

These playwright-directors reproduce reality through live testimonies; theirs is a reality that leads us to the discovery of the self-conscious use of language, symbols and a yearning for freedom through issues that the women characters raise in the text. Among these, and in all three plays, is exposing the image of traditional women as drawn by the male authority to suit its own interests and pleasure.

In all three plays, the woman appears as the mistress of the house, the manager; the home is her shelter and her world, full of sewing and cleaning and other domestic duties. Despite the fact that many intellectuals since the nineteenth century have called for a fairer distribution of domestic duties between men and women, they remain (in the East as well as in the West) primarily a woman's responsibility. Afflicted by Clarity draws a portrait of the superwoman: economic analyst and excellent cook, the 'no matter how you throw me I always land on my feet' woman, and the one of whom everybody – family, friends and even Abu Mohammad the grocer – approves. In Lorca's *Women*, the needle and sewing are women's domain; sewing the veil, embroidering the flag in which Marianna wraps her body. What the man in Lorca's *Women* seeks is a quiet home, a woman by his side and no more than that. In *The Music Box*:

women at home weave threads; they go around in circles like the doll in the music box. They turn on themselves in order to forget themselves, and forget that home is a prison, a trap, a shelter, a woman's house, home, homes...

Another theme common to the three plays is the relationship of women with their bodies. In Lorca's *Women*, Yerma says: 'Our wombs were created to carry children, to embellish themselves with them, the way a cloud embellishes itself with rain; a woman's beauty lies in motherhood.'

In the plays, women's looks and beauty are stressed, as is their fear of old age. We see a good example of this in the following dramatic monologue by Yerma: 'I should be taller and thinner, long and lithe, and move in



harmony with my body's curves... long-necked... slender... delicate... and graceful, a small waist and generous breast.' In the same play, Adela expresses her rebellion and fear: 'I don't want my body to wither.' The shape of the body is at the centre of the depiction of reality,<sup>6</sup> as well as of the relationships through which are described women's reaction to masculine authority. Are women not always compelled to maintain their shape and beauty? They struggle bitterly with themselves, with the past and with memory, with reality and the world, and with their bodies, especially in old age. According to Jung: 'the old woman who considers the *anima*'s withdrawals, or the feminine principle, an intimate energy, believes that losing it is the reason behind every psychological ailment from which she suffers'.<sup>7</sup>

In Lorca's *Women*, the bride's fear that her body might wither leads us to believe that women are reduced to their looks, which is tantamount to reducing their existence to a single positive trait, to being a desirable subject, or 'a subject that draws together all the self-contradictions of men'.<sup>8</sup> Submission to the male authority becomes embodied in the mother/woman, and leads to the continuous reproduction of this authority. In Lorca's *Women*, for instance, Bernarda orders: 'No one goes in or out without my permission,' and in Maya Zabib's play: 'You should not open your legs when you are wearing a skirt.' This ambivalent personality represents the core issue lying at the heart of motherhood, a motherhood based simultaneously on care and destruction. With Lorca's *Women*, this situation will not last long; the other women band together and kill Bernarda, but the male authority will not completely vanish, for Bernarda will be replaced by Yerma, who will reproduce the male heritage.

## **Form and language**

In their plays, Awatef Naim, Sawsan Darwaza and Maya Zabib abandoned the Aristotelian dramatic formula in favour of an internal conflict within and between characters, and their conflict with the male authority, as represented, for instance, by the mother/Bernarda. All three writers break classical moulds and their plots are no longer woven in the traditional form (i.e. a central point out of which all events unfold), before returning to it, escalating, developing, in crisis, and ultimately exploding.

Moreover, Naim, Darwaza and Zabib do not divide their texts into acts and scenes according to a developing and escalating formula based on the traditional structure of the typical dramatic text. Instead, in all three plays they distribute these women's experiences through monologues punctuated by dialogue, such as that involving Salma in *Afflicted by Clarity* and Adela in Lorca's *Women*, in order to express or comment on the male authority – the basis of all women's problems.

The playwrights use a dramatic language that embodies those aspects of reality that are repressed and ignored, an everyday language more impulsive and typical of the world of women. It allows women's expressions to reveal themselves through monologues in the form of intimate conversations with the self<sup>9</sup> (especially the feminist self and its pain), and through this, the character asks herself what she feels, and expresses her internal anxiety and confusion when compelled to make a decision. The monologue is the means through which these women, who reveal their inner conflicts<sup>10</sup> through dialogue and suffer in silence, express their existential conflict.<sup>11</sup>

## **The narrative structure**

Two literary structures recur: the first follows development from the struggles of childhood up to the release that maturity affords, thus bringing the heroine's training period to an end. This is what we see in *The Music Box*. However, despite the fact that the narrative style essentially follows a chronological timeline, it is beset by regular flashbacks that render the succession of events more circular than sequential, a form of event succession that either fosters development or leads to death. The narrative style of all three texts fosters an emerging development when the playwrights reveal the repressed condition of women. The second pattern has to do with the awakening consciousness, embodied in the woman whose development has been obstructed by her lack of feminist awareness, until she becomes aware, which is when her development can truly begin (Sawsan Darwaza, Maya Zabib).

## **The feminist character and the particularity of position**

In all three plays, the character types vary according to their respective vision and role. Although each has her own non-biological particularity, it is a particularity of position, intrinsic and changeable, delineated by the woman's place in the symbolic cultural context, and her relationship to it. For instance, the characters in Lorca's *Women*, except for Adela, seem stereotypical, dependent on the male. Yerma says: 'When my mouth is covered with a handkerchief, and my hands are bound in the grave, I will submit to my fate.'<sup>12</sup> In Lorca's *Women* the bride says: 'In my breast is a scream that I am trying to stifle.'

Then there is the new woman, the strong free woman in *Afflicted by Clarity*, anxious to safeguard her human dignity and economic independence. She identifies with the common cause and experiences a severe conflict. She is angry with men and society for treating her like a creature resistant to progress. She is like a safe stored in the archives, but has started to expose what has for so long been concealed and ignored.

Similarly, in *The Music Box*, a nameless character 'is drawing the boundaries of her house around her body; she alone can hear her voice'. She lives the escalating condition that shows that women are being transformed, a condition she reveals by saying: 'My face is becoming detached; my skin is not mine anymore, my smell has changed and my soul is disintegrating.' These texts give us characters who, through a circular narrative, persist in giving us their independent interpretations: they all change and repeat their stories and, in order to be honest with themselves, go round and round in endless circles until another important transition intervenes to put an end to the game. Each of the stories embodies femininity in its rivalry and conflict with the male within the cultural patriarchal contexts pointed out by the characters of Salma and Adela.

## **Structure and aesthetics of the directors' art**

### *(a) Staging and sets*

Naim's stage settings consisted of strips hanging over a bare stage, symbolizing liberation, freedom and unfettered chains. On the other hand, she uses the same box that was also to be used in *The Music Box*, but to a different end: in Lorca's *Women* the box signifies prison, an image brought

to life by the clanging sound of the key as it unlocks the box, reminiscent of the sound of unlocking a prison cell door. In *The Music Box*, Maya Zabib uses the box as a place to store personal belongings and memories. She transcends sets, and even goes beyond the stage itself: she took to staging her play in the sitting rooms of friends and acquaintances.

For *Afflicted by Clarity*, Darwaza used a bare stage which she filled with her mirror and personal belongings, a rubbish bin and a radio, props usually used in monodrama, whereby things that carry a certain significance become the main protagonists, and the actor's mainstays.<sup>13</sup> Darwaza brilliantly used each object to develop a given social gesture and supported it with sound effects from everyday life – for example, the telephone, which plays a prominent role in both the text and the performance.

### *(b) The acting*

In the performance of Lorca's *Women*, the acting went hand in hand with the lighting, which emphasized the actress's features, facial expressions, movements and voice, the expression of sweetness and loneliness. The actresses' black clothes infused the stage, a sign of dispossession, black being the objective equivalent of sadness in the collective memory.

In the performance of *Afflicted with Clarity*, Sawsan Darwaza uses a quaint formula that falls between the dramatic and the realistic, to make use of the character both dramatically and realistically. In other words, she uses drama technology to build the character in a manner that logically justifies the development of the feminist persona:

She is someone who knows what she wants, who has a question to ask (in a different voice), a new, different and... sensitive person. I must meet her, she does not make concessions... she speaks to herself, just like that... she has a good clear declarative line one can hold onto and understand; this is a character with her own dramatic justification... that develops in tandem with the escalating event, knowing what she wants, a remarkable character... an awesome character.

In *The Music Box*, Maya Zabib uses a dramatic style known as performance art that relies on the visual arts, and on realistic performances that isolate the imagination. It is a style in which acting depends on the spoken narrative rather than on the movement and interpretation. With these two playwright-directors (Sawsan Darwaza and Maya Zabib), we focus on oral discourse rather than that of movement and diction, because they trust

the power of the spoken word on stage, alongside objects with certain significance: the mirror and the box, for example. Naim, on her part, relies on an inner rendition of women, on voice and movement, and on Stanislavsky's total psychophysical integration.

## Conclusion

This study leads us to the following conclusions: First of all, the themes of all three plays clearly belong to three different generations: from the pioneering generation to which Naim belongs, through Darwaza's and finally to Zabib of the new generation. Their intellectual content is no doubt feminist in orientation, and this has definitely not taken place in isolation of the gradual spread of feminist ideas, despite the difficulty we might have in measuring the extent of their impact.<sup>14</sup>

Still, we note the following:

- A link exists between these three works, namely their intent to reveal the point of view of women on all matters, using drama as a vehicle – for example, women's sense of dispossession, injustice and coercion; bending under the weight of all this, they finally understand it.
- A feminist rebellion takes place against the given state of affairs, whereby the high psychological cost women are made to pay in all three plays produces counter-reactions. These subjugated women take preventative defensive positions, because human nature compels human beings to seek freedom and liberation. 'I black out then I come to, a piece of cloth covers my eyes, and I tear at it with my rings,' says a character in *The Music Box*, but she adds that the light shines from inside the music box. The same applies to the act of killing the male authority, in *Bernarda Alba*: it is the symbolic killing of this authority and its rejection by the feminist consciousness. This rejection, however, cannot continue and escalate because women, Lorca's women in particular, are still under the influence of inherited customs that have taken root in Adela's consciousness. Adela takes over Bernarda's role in reproducing male values. She declares mourning and locks the doors.
- Locking doors, registering women in the archives and the masculine moral values that mothers reproduce as they bring up their daughters are all present in Maya Zabib's text: 'Sit properly and don't open your

legs.’ Other examples in all three texts refer to these same values, indicating that inherited customs and repression are still present in the minds and thoughts of all three generations of women, and that the mother/male authority is still actively reproducing them. Thus, despite the rise and development of feminist thought, it still has to contend with social values and customs stronger than itself. To overcome them, what is needed is a commitment to a feminist consciousness that would contribute first to uncovering the repressed feelings, then to declaring rebellion against them.

- It is no longer just a matter of uncovering that which is unspoken in all three texts, as we find out in *Afflicted by Clarity*: ‘Look at what this back of mine has endured all these years, just like my heart. I am not your archive; I exist.’ We are already here at the stage of rebellion and active rejection. This quotation indicates the presence of a consciousness that has infiltrated the mind through the feminist consciousness (i.e. through women’s awareness of their freedom and willpower). This is made evident in the following sentence in *Afflicted by Clarity*: ‘I can also choose just like that, without needing the mediation of the quartet or having to abide by a decision; I am the one who makes decisions.’ This feminist consciousness is also apparent when, in a trance-like state, her hair dishevelled, Salma shouts with all her strength into the camera: ‘I write poetry. Open your eyes; record and store this in your memory. The story began when I knew who I wanted to be.’ Adela, in *Lorca’s Women*, says: ‘When my mouth is covered with a handkerchief, and my hands are bound in the grave, only then will I submit to my fate.’ Similarly, another nameless character in *The Music Box* tears up the cloth covering her eyes with her rings, because ‘... I am not afraid’.
- These are feminist texts because they do not care about what men write from a woman’s perspective, whether about men or women, or any other subject. They were written directly from a feminist perspective, as Sawsan Darwaza and Maya Zabib did, or, though adapted from the creative genius of a man, and used to embody the playwright’s feminist views by focusing on women’s discourse, as Naim did when she combined different texts by Lorca.<sup>15</sup> These plays/performances belong to the feminist theatre, since all three women wrote about subjects that go right to the heart of the particular

circumstances of women, their subjugation, their relationship with their bodies whose aesthetic contours are drawn by men. This is why their writing and theatrical experiences are different and particular to them.

- Women's feminist and feminine theatre is a sensual form of theatre to which Lacan's belief that the eye reads and hears perfectly applies. This theory has to do with the gaze that remains the main component of the individual I, and prepares it to enter through language into the symbolic, social and cultural system.<sup>16</sup> And because some writers tried to deprive females of the power of looking and gazing, some adepts of feminist critique believe that touch, not eyesight, is the main component of women's identity.

The three directors we have examined focus on producing a sensual drama, and their attention to it indicates their desire to show women as complete beings, with full use of their senses, as well as with their search for full consciousness and for attaining collective and individual identities in a harmonious world. Throughout the performances they use cinematographic techniques, choreography and decor to create a dramatic world in the imagination, especially the sense of smell. These are performances during which we hear, see, touch and smell.

In *Afflicted by Clarity*, the other character cannot smell the oranges Salma is eating after she decides to break the diet that would give her 'a narrow waist and a generous breast'. She also cannot taste the sweet chocolate that Salma is enjoying rapturously a few millimetres away from the camera, or smell the Nablus soap with which a young Salma washes herself to become clean and shiny as her grandmother recommended. Maya is busy smelling things: the house smells always good... and the kitchen is full of small boxes; she is also busy touching things in the closet, as do Adela and Marianna who embroider and sew cloaks and veils in Lorca's *Women*.

Our conclusion from studying the structural and technical aspects of these plays is that women have so far not succeeded in creating a feminist theatrical structure, nor a dramatic technology with feminist aesthetics. This is due to men's longer experience in the intellectual and creative fields, and to women's lack of cumulative experience, which prevents them from laying modern foundations with feminist specificities. They therefore rely

on already existing structures and aesthetics established by men, though they have distinguished themselves in embodying an intellectual, technical and aesthetic vision of their own. According to Giliana Hanna, the reason is perhaps that 'men are born in a world that allows them to plan and organise their life in a single ascending line, with a beginning and a clear preset end, and established notions for a middle, then an end'.<sup>17</sup> The experience of women is alien to this organized monolithic course, since it is essentially based on diversity and intersection.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Lebanese University, Bahithat.

1. Helene Keyssar (1997), *Feminist Theatre*, translated by Mona Slam (Cairo: Center for Languages and Translation, Academy of Arts).

2. Sandra Harding (1986), *The Science in Feminism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), p. 24; quoted in Youmna Tarif al-Khouly, 'alniswiya wa falsat al'ilm' (Feminism and the philosophy of science), *'Aalam al-Fikr*, 34 (October–December 2005), p. 10.

3. Susan Bassnett (1993), *Women's Experimental Theatre*, translated by Sana' Saliha (Cairo: majalet al masrah), 58, p. 34.

4. Dorothy Robbins (1993), *almasrah alniswi walitijah al'abathi* (The Feminist Theatre and Absurdist Tendencies), translated by Nuhad Sleih, 59, p. 138 (Cairo: majalet almasrah).

5. From Susan Darwaza's *musaba bil wuduh*, manuscript, p. 7.

6. Awatef Naim, *nisa' lorca* (Lorca's Women), manuscript, p. 2.

7. Mustapha Hijazi (1998), *altakhallof alijtima'i: madkhal ila sychologiat alinsan almaqhour* (Social Backwardness, Gateway to the Psychology of the Downtrodden) (Beirut: Arab Development Institute), p. 198.

8. Ibid.

9. Mary Castiglie Anderson, 'Staging the unconscious: Edward Albee's tiny Alice', *Renascence: Essays on Value in Literature*, 33 (1979), p. 87.

10. Bassnett, *Women's Experimental Theatre*, p. 20.

11. Mary Elias and Hanan Qassab (1997), *almu'jam almasrahi lil-mar'a, mafahim wa mustalahat almasrah wa funun al'ard* (Dictionary of the Theatre: Theatrical Concepts and Terminology, and the Art of Performance) (Beirut: maktabat lubnan), p. 493.

12. Awatef Naim, *nisa' lorca*, p. 17.

13. Elias and Qassab, *almu'jam almasrahi*, p. 33.

14. Bassnett, *Women's Experimental Theatre*, 58: 33.

15. Rida al-Thaher (2001), *ghorfat virginia wolfe: dirasa fi kitabat alnisa* (Virginia Wolfe's Room: A Study of Women's Writing) (Damascus: al-mada for Culture and Publication), p. 6.

16. Jacques Lacan (1944), *The Mirror Stage* (London: Longman Press), p. 50.

17. Hanna Scolnicov (2000), *almar'a w'al fada' almasrahi* (Woman's Theatrical Space) translated by Mohamed Lufty Naufal (Cairo: Arts Academy), p. 18.



## CHAPTER 7

### *Huqouq almar'a: Feminist Thought and the Language of the Arab Women's Movement\**

*Jean Said Makdisi\*\**

Those of us who belong to the Arab feminist and women's movement have much to learn from George Orwell's work on the connection between language and power. Language, he taught us, reflects the reality of power structures, and their ability to manipulate meaning and memory through the use – or deliberate misuse – of words, phrases and slogans. This manipulation also both reflects and creates the mindset of the consumers and users of the engineered language, who, either in a state of dumb oblivion, unawareness and lazy habit, or in a state of compliant terror, become submissive victims of the very power structures that wish only their dehumanized, unquestioning obedience. In Orwell's most famous novels, *1984* and *Animal Farm*, the manipulation of language is the clearest and most sinister sign of the manipulation of the population.

In his 1946 essay, 'Politics and the English language',<sup>1</sup> Orwell writes that

the English language is in a bad way, but it is generally assumed that we cannot by conscious action do anything about it. Our civilization is decadent and our language – so the argument runs – must inevitably share in the general collapse.

He blames 'the half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes', for the apathetic public response to the corruption of the language.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, what Orwell says about the English language applies, I think, equally to any language, and certainly to contemporary Arabic. At the heart of his argument, at least as concerns us in the context of Arab feminism, is the following paragraph:

Now, it is clear that the decline of a language must ultimately have political and economic causes ... But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form, and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step toward political regeneration...<sup>3</sup>

According to Orwell, clichés and absence of precision signify the deterioration not only of the language itself, but also of the public response that neither employs nor demands clarity of meaning from its officials or its media. Eventually the original energy and vision that created words, phrases and idioms dissipates, and the true meanings of sentences become disguised behind a veil at best of vagueness, ambiguity and unintelligibility, and at worst of deliberate lies. ‘In our time,’ he writes, ‘it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing ... political speech and writing are largely the defence of the indefensible’.<sup>4</sup> He goes on to say that ‘[p]olitics itself is a mass of lies, evasions, folly, hatred and schizophrenia’, having already established that ‘[t]he great enemy of clear language is insincerity’.<sup>5</sup>

If this is an extraordinarily pessimistic view of the use and state of language as well as of politics, it is a view that we must, here in the Arab world, concede as nonetheless quite appropriate to our condition. Political language has degenerated to the point that is so full of lies and clichés that very few take it seriously: political speeches, rife with such fine words as ‘democracy’, ‘rights’, ‘citizens’ rights’, ‘progress’, ‘the modern state’, ‘the rule of law’, ‘the welfare of citizens’, ‘the will of the people’, ‘transparency’, ‘the fight against corruption’, etc., are so blatantly dishonest as to be dismissed out of hand by the public as inconsequential, boring and not worthy of comment, though obedience is demanded.<sup>6</sup> But if cliché disguises dishonesty and hypocrisy, there is hope in exception, which should be especially promising for the women’s movements. ‘Where it is not true [that political writing is bad writing],’ writes Orwell, ‘it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel expressing his private opinions, and not a “party line”’.<sup>7</sup>

Now if there is anyone that ought rightfully to be rebellious, using fresh imagery and meaningful language to convey new and unorthodox thought,

it must be women. It seems to me that women – feminists and activists – ought to be (among other things of course) critics of the public discourse, especially, but not only, when it comes to their own demands and their analysis of society. They should, it seems clear to me, join in the general state of dissatisfaction and protest by supporting all other disadvantaged groups. We should especially be able to discern the lies in the sympathetic clichés used by the powerful to disguise the fact that they have no intention of taking the demands of women seriously. It seems to me, however, that not only are we tolerating and swallowing, in the Arab feminist movements, a large degree of lies from our politicians and even our media, but we are also (I am sorry to say) engineering, in our public discourse, our own form of decadent and falsely utilitarian language.

The term *huqouq almar'a*, 'the rights of women' – or, more accurately, 'the woman' – is a good example of this sort of use of language, as is the equally overused phrase *tahrir almar'a* (the liberation of woman). These phrases were once aggressive calls to arms (one might even call them revolutionary terms), with enormously important implications, including the reinterpretation of Arab societies in the throes of their particular constructions of modernity. Today, however, they have degenerated to the point where they have become so ill-defined and vague as to be harmless and easily ignored, though often cited in the public discourse not only of politicians but of women as well. The phrases today evoke neither a thrill in the breasts of women aspiring to real change, nor the slightest bother to the powers that be, both public and private, and certainly no great interest in society at large. Powers and public alike either accept the terms with little thought to their real meaning and with sure, though usually unspoken, recognition that these present no threat of meaningful change. Or, with equally little thought, they vehemently deny the validity of these, and wave them away as insignificant matters, already dealt with, on which no further time or energy should be wasted.

Most important of all, the precise meaning of *huqouq almar'a* and *tahrir almar'a* has been lost in the linguistic fog produced by years of avoiding the articulation of direct meaning by both those in power and those seeking change. In the first place, the use of the singular, abstract *mar'a* or 'woman' aborts the huge variations in the economic, social and cultural conditions of women in their various regions and societies, rendering toothless the very power of specificity, of variety and number, and therefore of multiplicity of

analyses and claims. It places us in the realm of poetic description, rather than in the world of political, legal and economic reality. In the second place there is neither clarity nor unanimity, even within women's circles, as to the precise meaning of *huqouq*, any more than there is of *tahrir*. What constitutes liberation? Which rights are being proclaimed? Whence do they emanate? From the various national constitutions? The universal declaration of human rights? CEDAW? Religious law, whether ecclesiastical or *sharia*? Or, as is sometimes argued, that most famous, useful and entirely fictitious *passe-par-tout*: tradition? But if the rights that we are demanding are already explicit, or at least inherent, in any or all of these sources, as so many argue, though from various points of view, then what is their use? And why have they not been applied? Most important of all, even if we acknowledge the argument, why should we accept the boundaries set by these pre-ordained rights, and not push different, more radical demands far beyond these boundaries?

If those in power use these phrases to disguise their indifference or their enmity, members of the women's movements use them for tactful insinuation, to avoid the direct expression of serious discontent that they know is a dangerous threat to the establishment, and that they do not feel they have the power to press. Feeling their own weakness, they try not to offend, but on the contrary to remain in the good books of the political forces that they regard as too strong for them to challenge directly, but from whom they must extract whatever gains they may hope to acquire. Among these forces are the religious establishments, both Christian and Muslim; the new, aggressive Islamic groups, so hostile to women while claiming to protect them; the class of big business and other economic structures, useful as funders and patrons of 'women's causes' which have then to be watered down and made innocuous enough to keep their support; the various political parties, and the wealthy and powerful families, from whose ranks the few Arab women politicians mostly emanate.

Members of the women's movements feel they cannot afford the enmity of any one of these groups, let alone the whole lot, however much they complain about them in private. In their public discourse, therefore, women have come to use the term *huqouq almar'a* to generalize their aims, and thus to disguise for practical reasons their essentially subversive work in order to make it seem less subversive than it is. The various movements, which often have contradictory philosophies, use the phrase *huqouq*

*almar'a* without clear definition of its precise meaning, often without identifying its sources, and almost always without questioning the boundaries of these sources or, most important of all, not questioning their legitimacy in governing women's lives. The problem is that as they use the term they fall into the habit of the relationship with power that language represents; they lose their direction and become victims of their own clichés. Thus the demands get watered down along with the language, and catering to power, once adopted as a necessary strategy, becomes an end in itself.

Another major taboo imposed on themselves by the women's movements comes from the fear of appearing to be copying the West. In this, the people they fear to offend are not only the religious groups but also secularists and nationalists, whose robust anti-imperialism often includes, without much serious thought, feminist demands. Feminism, these people claim, is a Western invention imported by Arab women thoughtlessly imitating their Western counterparts. Thus caught in an ideological vice, the Arab women's movements feel their safety and success lie in avoiding conflict, and in asserting at every turn their commitment to an authentic religious, cultural and national tradition. Needless to say, the arguments that arise from this stance often require a kind of acrobatic thought process, and a cliché-ridden language necessary to disguise the inherent contradictions.

While the cautious strategies of the women's movements have, to a certain degree and for a certain time, been successful, and progress has been made in providing new or at least reformed laws to improve the lives of women, they have not achieved the kind of wide support – especially from the mass of women – that is required for truly radical change. The reason for this, it seems to me, is the fact that they have not been backed by a sufficiently active or widespread feminism.

When I speak of members of the women's movement, as opposed to feminists, I am referring to those who address specific problems or laws facing women in particular circumstances, who deal with these problems practically, and try to solve them one by one. Thus successive campaigns have been fought and won on such issues as improved terms for maternity leave, certain labour, tax and social security laws, aspects of the criminal code and so on. It is my contention, however, that in tackling particular issues, members of the women's movement are so deeply aware of the limitations of their own power, and the power of women in general, that

they demand from the local power structure only that degree of change they think can be extracted from it. In general they believe that change should be sought and achieved step by step, one thing at a time. In general, too, they do not believe in attempting to reach what they regard as unattainably lofty philosophical goals, but instead set themselves what they regard as 'realistic' ones. Indeed, they often avoid making very large claims precisely in order not to scare off the necessary political support; nor do they publicly challenge the givens of social and political life, whether based in religious custom, local power structures or economic realities. They try to work under the radar, so to speak, avoiding the difficult theoretical questions and problematic relationships that would come from adopting a more directly feminist stance. Indeed, many of them unambiguously denounce feminism altogether. The reason for this hostility has not been sufficiently analysed by us. It seems clear to me that one of the reasons is the deep desire of members of the women's movement to reflect and participate in national issues, rather than to appear to single out feminist demands.

Most of the women activists of my acquaintance and knowledge came to their activism by way of direct experience, or by way of socialist, Marxist or theocratic ideologies, or nationalist thinking, rather than by specifically feminist thoughts and writing.

This perhaps explains why the emphasis of the reforms has been on the law rather than on general culture, education and mindset. Whatever their individual beliefs (and some of the women activists I know have great contempt for the power structures), they approach their tasks diplomatically, with an eye out for achieving results rather than scoring ideological points. I have often heard them cite the proverb: 'We want to eat grapes, not kill the watchman.'

When I refer to feminists, on the other hand, I mean those who aim beyond the particular, and who raise the bar, so to speak, by philosophizing the problems faced by women. Relating particular problems to each other, they seek to analyse, and to identify in all aspects of past and present society, the sources of a general injustice against women. They place the particular issues in a broad framework that itself becomes the object they wish to change.

Feminism, it seems to me, should be guiding and illuminating the women's movements by providing wide arguments for radically broad change, expressed in the new and powerful language which is the subject of

this chapter. It is not (in my judgement) today fulfilling its role, at least not to a sufficiently wide public. I believe it is in decline, or in crisis. The feminist reinterpretation of history, literature, law, politics, economics, education, biography, religion, medicine and so on has not been widely sought or achieved in the Arab world, and therefore the wide attention has not been won that might have generated a mass mobilization of women to fight the good fight. I believe feminism should complement the work of the women's movement, and that at one time there was a greater cooperation – if not unity – between the two than exists now.

And because of the absence of masses of women committed to feminist principles, the feminist movement in the Arab world, and consequently the women's movement as well, have remained marginal to the major political currents of society, easily ignored by the powers that be in organizing the world in which we live.

Still, women have managed to put some pressure on public policy, though not necessarily the kind that is required. The Lebanese government, along with most other Arab governments, in response to both internal and external pressures from the global powers, has gradually appropriated the language and demands of a very rudimentary form of feminism, though in doing this they have robbed feminism of some of its credibility. Almost without exception they have appropriated the term *huqouq almar'a*, not because they are dedicated to improving the condition of women, but because it is a useful term for negotiating their way in the international community and especially among those who govern it. When two recent Lebanese governments were formed, they briefly included in their policy declaration the woman question: in 2006 the declaration included support (which remained nominal) for CEDAW, and in 2008 it included a statement promising to take action to prevent domestic violence. Again, neither promise led at the time to a public discussion, or even to public notice. And the most recent government caused a small, and totally fruitless, uproar in women's circles by not including a single woman in its ranks, thus at least more sincerely showing its disregard for women and their claims. Recently, when a network of women's NGOs and lawyers worked on creating a law to protect women from domestic violence, and pursued its passage through the necessary political processes, including parliament, they were about to claim success until at the last minute their campaign met the unrelenting

opposition of the religious establishment, against which they proved totally powerless.

With the exception of Qatar and Sudan, all the Arab governments have signed CEDAW (the UN Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women), though all of them with reservations.<sup>8</sup> Now a reading of this document – and I believe that very few members of the public, the intelligentsia or the media, not to mention those with political power, at least here in Lebanon, have in fact read it carefully, if at all – reveal it to be a radically important text, which, had it been taken seriously, would have transformed society. It should have led at least to stormy public debates and confrontations, perhaps even violence, between forces marshalled for and against it. Instead, it was ratified by the Lebanese Parliament without much public discussion, though with the reservations that many women's groups have since tried, unsuccessfully, to have lifted. Nothing took place remotely resembling the debates surrounding other political issues, such as the relative rights of the various confessional groups, or the right of Hezbollah to bear arms, or even the demands of trade unions. Although so many meetings within the women's groups revolve around CEDAW, and it is a subject to which hundreds of references are made within the movement, public discussion surrounding it is almost non-existent.

Arab reservations against CEDAW include the rejection of any part of the Convention which is inconsistent with Islamic *sharia* and family law.<sup>9</sup> One reservation which seems particularly dear to the hearts of the Arab governments, however, has nothing to do with *sharia*. Article 9, to which most of them have objections, reads as follows:

1. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men to acquire, change or retain their nationality...
2. States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children.<sup>10</sup>

The Egyptian reservations are explained thus:

... This is in order to prevent a child's acquisition of two nationalities where his parents are of different nationalities, since *this may be prejudicial to his future*. It is clear that the child's acquisition of his father's nationality *is the procedure most suitable for the child* and that this *does not infringe upon the principle of equality between men and women*, since *it is customary for a woman to agree*, upon marrying an alien, that her children shall be of the father's nationality.<sup>11</sup> [my italics]



The extraordinary assumptions behind the declarations italicized above show the degree of cultural prejudice the women's movement faces. In Lebanon, it is well known, though not often publicly acknowledged, that the real reason Lebanese women have, unlike men, no right to pass on their nationality to their foreign spouses and children is the fear on the part of politicians, mindlessly parroted by individuals across the political spectrum (including even members of the women's movement) that the result would be massive numbers of Palestinian men from the refugee camps acquiring citizenship by entering into marriages of convenience with Lebanese women. In the morbid imagination of some enemies of a change in the present law, since the majority of Palestinians are Muslims, each Palestinian man could theoretically marry four Lebanese women, and thus overwhelm the native population with his offspring. With or without this Darwinian perception, the sectarian balance of power at the heart of the political system would be destroyed, and the possible naturalization of nearly half a million Palestinian refugees and their offspring would add a huge burden to the Lebanese economy and infrastructure, and end the Palestine question at the expense of Lebanon.

That this theory is based on the assumption that a family is defined exclusively on the basis of the father's identity is bad enough. That it is insulting to Palestinians, who are not only viewed through a racist lens, but also seen to be ready to give up the claim to their homeland for which they have fought for almost 100 years, is worse. The insult to Lebanese women, however, is so gross as to be unthinkable. The implication is that they would, whether out of naive ignorance or greed, become passive instruments of the sinister plot.

While the women's rights movements have for years been trying unsuccessfully to change the nationality law, they have not publicly challenged the Palestinian theory, perhaps because there is not necessarily any consensus on how to do this, and perhaps also because some of its members share the view. In any case they have avoided dealing with it altogether. Today, many women's groups, including the most venerable and once most radical *lijnit huqouq almar'a allubnaniya* (League for Lebanese Women's Rights), are demanding that women be allowed to pass citizenship on to their *children* as a *natural right*, but avoid the question of the husband, and with it the gender equality specified both in the national constitution and in CEDAW. That this group has been complaining for so

many years about the reservations to CEDAW, and then in their own move avoiding the most important provision of the Convention, is astonishing, but quite representative of the degree to which the women's movement has been avoiding thorny political confrontations. Of the women's groups demanding change in the nationality law, the only ones insisting on absolute gender equality are the radical *altajammu alnissa'i aldimograti allubnani* (The Lebanese Women Democratic Gathering) and the Collective for Research and Training on Development – Action, who founded the Regional Arab Women Right to Nationality Campaign, which is now part of a global 'Claiming Equal Citizenship Campaign' supported by the Women Learning Partnership. In the meantime, thousands of Lebanese women married to foreigners are deprived of the primary right to full citizenship, and thousands of real families, with real problems in terms of residence, schooling, employment, health and other areas, are adversely affected by the present law.

The Lebanese parliamentary elections in 2005 were hotly disputed and endlessly discussed both before and after they took place. Women's questions, however, were scarcely mentioned, least of all in the campaigns of the handful of women who ran, and who counted for their success more on family connections than on political stands. Instead of taking the opportunity to pursue vigorously the all-important campaign for full nationality rights and step up the momentum of the movement during the lively election campaign, the issue was on the contrary shelved. Many women in the movement claimed that the extreme polarization that followed the assassination of the former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri, was 'not the right time' to debate women's issues.<sup>12</sup> During the 2009 election campaign, the question was not raised.

Thus, though greater political participation – including a parliamentary quota – is one of the most insistent demands of the women's movement, women took themselves out of the political equation at this most crucial juncture. Nor did they press the issue of the quota. Neither they nor their problems were taken in the least bit seriously by the politicians scrambling for votes, and they made no effort whatsoever to appeal to women voters on this or any other issue.

But how is all of this related to the question of language and political power? Both feminists and activists, in complementing each other, it seems to me, are required to bury the clichés and with them the musty habits that

are produced by avoiding conflict and not saying, in their public utterances, directly what they mean. To do that they need to think and analyse carefully, to be courageous enough to challenge the powers, and thus create a new discourse. All meaningful revolutions have introduced a new public, political language, a new vocabulary, even a new grammar. The phrase *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, the word *citoyen* (citizen), with its train of meaning and implication, and the Russian word 'Comrade' were aspects of radically new discourses, and reflected enormously important changes brought about by the French and Russian revolutions. During the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, such insulting words as 'nigger', 'coloured' and 'Red Indian' were eliminated, and replaced with 'African-American' and 'Native American'. In more recent times, and closer to home, the Palestinian popular resistance to Israeli occupation made the Arabic words *intifada* and *nakba* part of the international discourse: these words have now been absorbed into English, French and other languages. All of these were not mere cosmetic changes, but reflected a major reinterpretation of history and a real change in power relations.

When the Anglo-Saxon second-wave women's movement began in the 1960s, it was accompanied by a major critical assessment of socio-political attitudes as represented by the words 'mankind', 'chairman', etc., all of which have become anathema in the political discourse. In France, sensitivity erupted over such linguistic anomalies as women addressed as *Madame le professeur*, *Madame l'ambassadeur*, and *Madame le ministre*.

Though a new sensitivity to the implications of certain Arabic words that refer to women in the masculine form (e.g. *alqadi*, *alna'ib*, *alra'is* – the judge, the MP and the president, head or chief) has also arisen, there has been no overhaul of the language to reinterpret the place of women in society. There has been no creative linguistic outburst to help articulate a new mindset, a new kind of reality. And if we do not have new words, phrases or idioms with which to express our new visions and critical perceptions of ourselves and our societies, then we will remain bound by the same realities represented in the old, cliché-ridden language. And if we do not apply serious intellectual criticism to our situation, then we will not feel the need to create that new language.

I believe that women's societies and organizations have been working against injustice, and for greater advancement, without either the disadvantage or the benefit of the complicating theoretical cover that might

be offered by feminism, and expressed in that refreshed new language. It should be a wise, brave, clear-sighted, imaginative kind of feminism that can overcome the problems and proclaim itself fearlessly above the din of conflict. Here in the Arab world we have much to learn from our feminist colleagues in the Indian subcontinent, in the rest of Asia, in Africa, as well as from black and immigrant feminists in Europe and the USA. They have gone much farther than we have in solving some of the same political and cultural problems that we face. For far too long we have been fixated with the 'mainstream' American and European models of feminism, and this has been a self-destructive obsession.

I in no way mean to imply by what I have said that there are no courageous Arab feminists or bold Arab feminist writings. There are many. But we need more, and we need them to coordinate – not necessarily to agree with each other's definitions, visions, aims and strategies, but at least not to work against each other, or to sabotage each other's efforts, but to coordinate so as to form what we can call a feminist movement – and we need to disseminate this bold feminism through the women's movement that is so active on the ground in order to reach the women who are most in need of support. In this regard, one of the questions we need to address most urgently is why there has been so little support for feminism among the majority of Arab women. It is my belief that if feminists can resolve the dilemmas inherent in our feminism, we can effectively bridge the gap between the various articulations of power I have tried to describe, and could thus rejoin the women's movements, gaining for both, as for their constituents, a great boost and far greater impetus.

## Notes

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\*\* Independent Writer and Researcher, *Bahithat*.

1. George Orwell (1968), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (eds) (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.). *Volume IV: In Front of Your Nose, 1945–1950*, pp. 127–40.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 127–8.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 135–6.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

6. See Jean Said Makdisi ‘“*Insha Arabi*”: or power, knowledge, and language’, *Bahithat* (Journal of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 3 (1996–7); *Research and the Researcher in the Human Sciences in the Arab World*, pp. 364–77.

7. Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, p. 135.

8. United Nations (2011), ‘Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women: Text of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women’, available at [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/text.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/text.htm), accessed 2 June 2011.

9. United Nations (2011), ‘Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women: Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW’, available at [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm), accessed 2 June 2011.

10. United Nations (2011), ‘Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women: Text of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women’, available at [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/text.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/protocol/text.htm), accessed 2 June 2011.

11. United Nations (2011), ‘Convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women: Declarations, Reservations and Objections to CEDAW’, available at [www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm](http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/reservations-country.htm), accessed 2 June 2011.

12. After a respectable public struggle in the 1940s and early 1950s for full political rights, Lebanese women had gained the right to vote and be elected in 1952, well before women of many other nationalities.

## CHAPTER 8

### Femininity and Feminist Studies: Research, the Researcher and Cultural Constrictions in Lebanon\*

*Noha Bayoumi\*\**

Having focused in an earlier study on the difficulties that feminist researchers face, and on the various issues that plague modern Arab women, I shall examine in this study the work of women researchers, feminist studies, cultural factors that act as a kind of decorative but tight necklace constricting feminist development, and the ensuing challenges relating to knowledge. I have chosen to focus on the cultural constrictions in order to highlight the paradox that they form on the one hand an ornamental aesthetic and a form of energy that open up new horizons for feminist discourse, and on the other hand a set of restrictions with particular rules and criteria, too vast for this discourse to encompass.

Feminism is not a specialization but a critical position taken against those sciences that have failed to highlight various aspects of the discrimination against women, or to study women as women. This failure has resulted in a dearth of knowledge about women, although, according to Karl Popper's book *The Myth of the Framework*, the growth of knowledge relies entirely on difference. If we agree that feminism is a science that begins with a problem and ends with many others, and that the progress of feminism depends on the sensitivity, wealth, fertility and depth of the issues involved, then this means that its progress depends on learning more about women. Feminism is not a deeply rooted knowledge of women, because deeply rooted knowledge does not grow; it is rather a continuous effort to solve the problems that women encounter in their societies. This problem is, in itself, highly complex and needs awareness and understanding. Feminism is also

an attempt to discover ‘the truth’ about our world, or to come as close to it as possible.

In this chapter, I take a close look at the issue of women researchers as they pursue feminist studies and ask to what extent they are able to generate and promote knowledge about femininity, and delineate its features, components and differences, in a cultural framework whose hidden context describes its vision of femininity. In doing this, I shall be continuing a study already begun on various systematic and structural impediments to our thinking clearly, both as researchers and objects of study, about the feminist self.<sup>1</sup>

1. The first subject that needs to be addressed revolves around the difficulties that women researchers encounter in psychoanalysis, such as those Adnan Houbballah has shown in his book *Psycho-analysing Masculinity and Femininity*.<sup>2</sup> This matter requires both a self-image and a potential vision, and the theoretician herself finds it difficult to elevate knowledge to such an intellectual level, because her ‘I’ needs to develop a theory about the self, which is, itself, part of this theory. Sometimes, she finds it difficult to rid herself of emotional bias and beliefs, or she falls under the influence of social conditions beyond her control; or she is affected by her ‘I’ as it interacts with a built-up resistance that brings her closer or farther from the truth that she originally set out to prove.
2. There is a resistance deep within the researcher who interprets the phenomena, be it conscious or subconscious, that allows her only partially to accept theories that deviate from those she has personally developed about herself and her society. She cannot accept such theories without them causing an upheaval within herself, or without changing her personal criteria, as she might be unprepared to bear the consequences of the change. Therefore, she either rejects them altogether, or considers them to be of no more importance than any other philosophical or ideological theory.

Thus, if we take into account intellectual resistance to every event that causes a revolution in one’s way of thinking, or that requires a re-evaluation of one’s self and society, we would find a person in search of consistency and stability. Nothing causes an upheaval in this person as much as the

shock of intellectual modernity. Thus, because human beings are narcissistic by nature, they surround their heritage and acquisitions with an aura of grandeur and sanctity that clearly reflect the inflated collective 'I', its arrogance, pride and eagerness to fight any idea, even if proven unequivocally true, if she perceives it as a threat to her usurped 'I', and its deeply rooted illusions.<sup>3</sup>

The difficulties caused by the psychology and narcissism of the subject make it worth looking at the way female researchers study women. It is also worth observing the subjective world, of consciousness, feelings, beliefs and psychological tendencies, as it intertwines with the world of philosophy, science, art, literature, political systems, customs, mores and values – that is, the objective world of human civilization whose principal constituent elements are language and criticism.

My objective is to know the extent to which the female researcher is able, through her work on women, to express herself freely and find new avenues of research, and the extent to which these increasing numbers of feminist studies help form the researcher's awareness of her own and other women's femininity. When women study other women, they have the perfect opportunity to discover their own inner worlds, attitudes and thoughts on the issues they address. Men have never had the same opportunity because they rarely devote their time to studying women's issues in order to compare themselves to them. They also rarely take the time to study other men in order to see their own reflection in them, and to deduce the cultural context to understand its impact on the self, its experiences, thoughts and discourse. I believe, therefore, that the negative judgement that is often passed on women researchers who study other women represents at the same time a significant opportunity for them to discover their selves, through probing observation and deduction. Arab women have shown themselves to be more courageous than men because they have peered deeply into the self, examined it and given it expression. Women studying women is but a reflection of this tendency: this does not mean that some men have not tried to study masculinity, or that some women have not tried to study masculinity. Women writing about women is like psychoanalysis in that it liberates the writer from repression. If the repressed is able to return to the conscious world through the revealing path of language, one would be able to control this impulse and rid oneself of it, because if allowed to



express the unconscious sincerely, free speech allows one to liberate oneself and become once again creative... and productive.<sup>4</sup>

I begin from the fact that feminist studies are obstructed by cultural impediments linked to the researcher's mentality, and her submission to a cultural context that forces her usually to internalize different forms of coercion, as well as cultural, social and political taboos. This affects the nature of feminist studies, erects visible and invisible barriers, confuses one's consciousness, and steers criticism towards matters of agreement and away from more contentious and difficult issues. It distances the researcher from the discovery of self and others that might otherwise have liberated her from existing research frameworks. Instead, it makes her put off tackling various political, religious and legal issues, and promotes the culture of consensus and adaptability rather than difference. It also usually leads to incomplete and stunted cultural and social interpretations that lack clarity, boldness and honest analysis. It becomes necessary to deconstruct these studies rather than allow the mask to stay on as a way for women to adapt, as Jung says, to living and writing.<sup>5</sup>

In this chapter, I review some of my own research, as well as other studies undertaken by the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers (Bahithat), in order to reveal the breadth of their cultural variation. I also aim to show how the cultural context, while it allows the researcher to depart from traditional and stereotypical methods, on the one hand, shares, on the other, her efforts to write and research, a phenomenon that al-Ghathami calls the 'binary author'. In other words, this phenomenon occurs when the prevailing culture controls the author's involvement, and infuses her work with its discourse without her necessarily being aware.

I will point out a number of cultural indicators to which women researchers submit and ask how femininity is perceived within this context, and what circuitous ways researchers use in their feminist research, as they encounter the barriers that impede women's progress. I arrive at the conclusion that it is not enough to breach the walls; fortifications should be set upon and destroyed in order for feminist studies to make headway. This is how I began to feel after I took some time off, and removed myself emotionally from the subject at hand.

## **Breaching the fortifications of the patriarchal system**

This avenue of research constitutes a cultural position with a potential for self-expression that brings to the fore that which is latent in the culture; and because it is the object of consensus among feminist researchers, it has a telling significance and revolves around the mental image of what women's lives are really like. Let us see what this involves.

*The following paragraphs trace the themes and ideas that emerged from six studies that I undertook at different times in the past. Each of these shows an aspect of some of the points I wish to make*

### *1. Customs and law*

In a study about the customs, traditions, law and changes in women's conditions,<sup>6</sup> I showed how the law does not always change customs and traditions. When the law precedes the customs, there is no guarantee that it will be properly implemented; this makes changing mental stereotypes a worthwhile endeavour. This point is underlined by a number of theories that advocate prioritizing various prevailing mentalities and stereotypes of the relationship between men and women, and to the images that women have of themselves and others.

However, this is a devious approach, since the researcher submits to the pressure of toeing the prevailing cultural line as manifested in the immovable Personal Status Laws that regulate women's lives and family relationships. When women researchers found it difficult to change this law in Lebanon, they decided to work on dismantling the prevailing mindsets and stereotypes. The aim was to breach the walls of the Personal Status Laws by destabilizing its foundations, mythologies and contradictions with the daily realities of women's lives. The researcher also noticed that it is quite easy for some women in Lebanon, especially those with power (through their family, sectarian, wealth and class connections), to bypass the discriminatory laws that target women. Instead of a single unified Lebanese civil code, amended in line with recent developments in women's lives and with international conventions and laws, each sect in Lebanon has its own Personal Status Laws. The official permanence of these laws is a form of terrorism, exacerbated by power-based relationships that make the researchers unwilling to address them.

## *2. Young women professionals*

In a study on the professional and financial accomplishments of young Lebanese women,<sup>7</sup> it became clear that the patriarchal system had been breached in the business world, and that, today, women are capable businesswomen, quite well off and enjoy total financial independence. On the other hand, it seems clear that circumventing the patriarchal system still hinges largely on the attitude of the father, who is a key to their chances of success. When the father is open and supportive of his daughter's rights, she can go on to achieve professional and financial success; this means that the daughter's fate is determined by her father's attitude.

Being aware of change and bringing it out in the open is a good thing, provided it does not lull us into believing that we could apply this attitude to every situation, or blind us to the reverse condition. These two conditions exist side by side and are a fact of daily life; they represent the fight between two opposing contexts: the culture of male dominance does not yet allow others to alter it and purify it of its anomalies.

## *3. Women and politics*

The first of two separate studies I undertook on women's relationship with politics<sup>8</sup> ends at the redefinition of the political to encompass the social, and sees women's activities in the public domain and for the public good as political activism par excellence. This was an indirect censure on my part, as I realized that changing the political role of women in Lebanon is a goal almost impossible to achieve, due to the weakness of party and union activism, and to a political infrastructure configured to suit the sectarian make-up of the country. As for the religious sects themselves, they see women only as a collection of votes to win at election time, and exclude them from their strategies, decision-making processes and meetings. As far as the sects are concerned, women are mere fodder, and their role is void of any content worthy of them. Sects are fortresses in the face of women's effective participation in politics.

From the second study,<sup>9</sup> I arrived at the conclusion that women in Lebanon have given up on their state and no longer rely on it to support their rights, or help them widen their political, administrative, managerial

and strategic contributions. This was a circuitous position taken because the Lebanese state is torn between different sects, militias and families that neither respect it, recognize its authority nor need its institutions; it is a structure devoid of any institutional significance. In light of the state's insignificance, women have abandoned it in favour of the private domain where better opportunities exist for progress and achievement. The state is merely another dam blocking the progress of women. I compare feminist studies to a small river, which, when an obstacle blocks its course, tries to open a new one. Despite its positive aspects, I see in this position a way of bypassing the problem, as if this new course is itself the objective. Is this not a way of avoiding the main issue? Does it not prevent an interactive dialogue between two discourses: the feminist and the masculine? The first is humane and the latter discriminatory and violent. We are all to blame for bringing about the failure of a humane discourse, for although feminist research seems to come from outside masculine culture, it ultimately accepts remaining in the margin, and working within its confines.

#### *4. Love*

Has love changed or has its narration changed?<sup>10</sup> In this study, I arrive at the conclusion that the novels I examined succeeded in breaching the prevailing cultural norms, levelled harsh criticism at them, unveiled a social movement in intimate relationships in Lebanon, and revealed the fault lines in these relationships resulting from various obstacles to cultural, social, political and religious freedoms. What is certain is that Lebanese society is experiencing a brisk movement of social change, rife with influences and tendencies, some more permissive than others. Men and women show equal courage as far as emotional and perceptive self-expression is concerned, and we notice here and there the presence of masculine/feminine fantasies in the writing of both men and women, and a confrontation between perceptions of the 'I', the other and culture.

First, these novels show that men and women are fixated on a vision of love that transcends simple admiration, and is better defined as an identity of ideas and positions. If this stage is reached the relationship does not always have a happy ending. If it leads to marriage, the ensuing relationship often slips into bitter disappointment because of political failure and a

declining receptiveness to modernity. Second, it is impossible to have a balanced love relationship in the shadow of an unstable political, economic, social and cultural infrastructure. Third, erotic love is directly opposed to sentiment, and does not involve commitment; the narrative therefore addresses a temporary but suspended condition that indicates a concealed struggle between the traditional and the new. I also witnessed a certain shift in women's roles and social rights difficult to categorize or generalize. This study focused only on novels, but if we examine the studies on Love in the eighth volume of *Bahithat*, the annual Journal of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers,<sup>11</sup> we find that the theoretical and field studies are more conservative in nature, less open to disclosure and more vulnerable to cultural pressure than the novels. Because novels are based in the imagination rather than in statistics, the writers felt more at liberty to tackle such thorny issues as love. I found the same phenomenon in a study on the biographies of women, where 'I rarely found a description of their character and temperament, and there was no mention of love at all; almost all that was written was conservative in nature'.<sup>12</sup> The problem lies in the fact that women researchers are always under close examination by society, and I believe, based on a personal analysis that concerns me as much as others, that these women have chosen a circuitous approach rather than a more direct one to ensure that they can continue to do their research, and still be accepted. Women in our society usually avoid the term 'feminism'. But what is the real meaning of feminism? In my view, feminism is a critique of the patriarchal system that marginalizes women and that represents an attitude implicitly signifying submission to cultural norms for fear of rejection and alienation. When I invited a well-educated female poet to a conference, she said: 'I hope this is not a feminist conference.' I quickly answered: 'Yes, it is.' She responded with a gesture of her hand as if to strike someone, so I asked: 'Do you mean by *feminist* emotional and militant speeches?' She said: 'Yes.' I assured her that the conference was an academic one designed to take a serious look at feminist research.

I give this example to show how society and the intellectual class, both men and women, perceive feminism, which helps delineate ideas, confines them to those that are generally agreed upon, and makes it more difficult to violate the system when analysing the complexities of the present moment.

## 5. Masculinity today

The 12th volume of *Bahithat*, entitled *Deconstruction of the Concepts of Masculinity and Patriarchy in Contemporary Society*,<sup>13</sup> reaches the conclusion that masculinity is not in decline, that researchers do not realize the full extent of the repression of women, and that hierarchical relationships are based on class, gender and colonialism. It also reaches the conclusion that men should be aware of their behaviour and all this involves, including conscious and subconscious mechanisms, and that they should discuss the means of re-evaluating and amending them to reverse the domination-based man–woman equation. They need to undertake this process of deconstruction without indulging in guilt, and admit that they in fact dominate women.

The book points out that research on masculinity and patriarchy passed through earlier research on femininity, just as feminist studies have passed through studies of masculinity, paternalism and patriarchy. Does this path represent an impasse or an outlet? I believe it is an outlet for a better understanding, because individual is a bundle of relationships that define herself, her social identities and roles in society. When I say studying relationships, I do not mean gender studies, despite their importance; feminist studies involve closely observing different kinds of relationships and their problems. This is how we acquire a deeper understanding of femininity and the relationships it involves, which helps us perceive different forms of domination and freedom. Many studies and biographies show that the liberation of women largely hinges on the father's attitude, though this is by no means the only significant factor. Without the father's positive attitude, women seek other outlets, just as the small river does. Knowledge about masculinity, femininity and the relationship between the two helps us establish a reference point for cultural dominance. Men – save for writers and artists – are not used to delving into their inner selves in order to know themselves and women better, and this is where the problem in men's studies lies.

The study of femininity within the framework of the concept of patriarchy according to which women live their lives has played a role in uncovering the patriarchal system's discrimination against them, and in uncovering the role that women themselves play in perpetuating this system by bringing up their sons and daughters to different standards. Only rarely

did the feminist studies I examined allude to breaches in the system's fortifications, or the manner in which its priorities can be changed; nor have they examined the reinvention of patriarchy in different forms: 'It appears that the overwhelming male presence in men and women's imagination and fantasies in our Arab culture is almost primordial, and merely questioning it is enough reason to avoid it.'<sup>14</sup>

When *Deconstruction of the Concepts of Masculinity and Patriarchy in Contemporary Society* raises the question of the possibility of our remaining immersed in the masculine mindset or departing from it, it shows that in today's philosophy, the feminine as a way of thinking is associated with indecision, receptiveness and constant openness, traits that male philosophers have taken over and claim to embody. This has made the female gender a comprehensive one that draws on masculinity, but complements it with what femininity has best to offer. In turn, this has, according to the book, led the philosophers to the conclusion that femininity is not necessarily a trait confined to women, and that the required change simply involves women accommodating themselves to masculinity, and vice versa.

Bourdieu sees in symbolic violence the fact that we have before us a system with deep historic roots, and that the big mistake made by feminists was to approach male dominance with a mindset, reference points and patterns of consciousness established by these same mechanisms of domination.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, most female artists recreate the masculine representations, in both form and content, to please the male viewer and satisfy the market's demand for 'public taste'. However, although the *Bahithat* book under discussion highlights a number of recent changes in masculinity and femininity, we are still far from creating an intelligent equilibrium between a dominating masculinity and a sensitive femininity. For, while emphasis in the West is on the demise of patriarchy and on changes in the meaning of *macho* after its feminization, we are still, here in the East, reconstructing the old patriarchal system characterized by violence and war. Likewise, while in the West debate revolves around changes in masculinity, the East strives for a better manhood, save for a few attempts to draw awareness of a changing masculinity in the theatre and media. For its part, femininity, as portrayed in the public imagination, is far too soft to confront the world's harsh realities, and although the system of values has

become more pliable, in general, a girl's honour is still hostage to the values of male members of the family.

In this study, I reached the conclusion that society is in flux and that implicit changes in relationships are currently taking place within it, especially those between men and women, and their image of themselves and the other.<sup>16</sup>

## 6. Maternal relations

In my paper, 'Biography of cross-border motherhood: a mother's letters to her son', written for the 11th volume of *Bahithat*,<sup>17</sup> I started to tell the life story of what seemed like an ordinary woman, but concluded that in fact she was quite extraordinary. She played an essential role in lives of her nuclear and extended families, and sowed the seeds of art appreciation in her children, one of whom was the artist whose work, inspired early on by his mother's emotionally intelligent letters, I had the fortune to study. As I examined the meaning of motherhood through this woman's experience, I determined that she was a practical and independent individual, who followed no one's example, did not have a particular writing style, and did not play the role of the stereotypical mother. She developed her own style as a mother: her children had emigrated, and yet she did not consider herself a victim, nor did she indulge in the typical anxieties of motherhood. She belonged to the generation raised in the first half of the twentieth century, was reconciled with her role, and followed a simple uncomplicated model in tune with her identity. In this she was unlike today's mothers, the nature and parameters of whose role are so ill-defined. While her optimistic nature and religious tendency were well adapted to the traditional, they still allowed for the new. As far as she was concerned, there was no contradiction between tradition and modernity, worldliness and spirituality, the old and the new; the self generates culture and, at the same time, is a product of it. We notice that there is clarity in this mother's role as opposed to the ambiguity in the modern mother's role. This observation led me to believe in the need to eliminate from our perceptions the stereotypical duality between modernity and tradition, the private and the public, the inner and the outer, the religious and the profane. These dualities act like



dams blocking the course of a river: they have prevented the clear perception of events on the ground, and appreciating their variety.

This study revealed another problem that needs to be discussed, namely that our very perception of these dams, based on inherited visions regarding motherhood, is itself a mindset. Thus, although the volume of *Bahithat* on the lives of women under discussion succeeded in dismantling several stereotypes regarding women and their relationship with men, and revealed the rich variations of motherhood, in the section on testimonies we find that the most violent testimonies, revealing the worst forms of discrimination against women, were written under pennames.

In order to know women better, we need to face the self that adapts itself to the way culture and politics treat and control it.<sup>18</sup> Women's images of themselves pass through several moulds and stereotypes, whereby the biological core falls under the impact of the social system and becomes mired in its cultural practices.<sup>19</sup> We still need studies on the controls exercised over women, their reaction and resistance to these, and their relationship with the feminine, which involves its own signs, criteria and indicators. Furthermore, the strategies women employ vis-à-vis this control require clarification, and this can only happen when we learn how the self and its various manifestations are formed, know the contexts of place and time in which the self was formed, and understand why women submit to and accept their own exclusion. The mindset motivates behaviour and determines positions more than present reality does. It is vital that the individual intervenes to change the social traditions she inherited, by incorporating life's manifestations and behaviour in their historic context, to dispel any potential for their reinterpretation based on a concept that conceals society's dynamism and presents it as static.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusions

The use of circuitous approaches signifies the rejection of prevailing norms and the attempt to breach the fortifications. What is important now is to contemplate storming these fortifications to introduce radical reforms, because discrimination against women has led to domestic violence, fanaticism, inequality and the rejection of the other and of difference, all of which are cultural anomalies.

Today, I am careful not to be content with a minimum amount of information about women, dismissive of the importance of the rule of law that should help us claim our rights, and not to belittle political participation. I am also careful to stay away from official state positions, not to hesitate in anything that has to do with feminism, whether in actions or thoughts, and conscious of the importance of undertaking studies that criticize various moral values and legal criteria, based on legal anthropological studies and on moral and legal philosophy. Women, more than men, should ensure that the freedom of expression and publication are guaranteed, especially in matters that concern the kind of education and research that produces new models of historic work.

Feminist studies in Lebanon have made as much progress in their analytical ability as the local cultural framework allows; they have also contributed to expanding this framework and creating their own space to show their strength and efficacy within Lebanese society. When claiming their rights, women in Lebanon tend to find strength from within themselves rather than from the support of others (the state, legislation, sects), due to the high walls erected in their path, which is perhaps why female researchers tend to address issues and domains that do not involve political decision-making and legislation.

Describing the Lebanese system as allowing citizens more general freedoms than other Arab systems do has put women in a bind; they stopped believing in the need to undertake feminist studies or promote feminism, and have become oblivious to the paradox that they enjoy a number of apparent freedoms which are in fact empty. These freedoms lull us into believing that our country is democratic, in the sense that women are citizens whose rights are respected, and live in a just world in which roles, wealth, business and strategic decisions are distributed fairly. The reality is different, however, as evidenced by the reports of various organizations that neither conceal the facts nor are difficult to understand. We therefore find that it is precisely the difference between claims and reality that has actually stunted the progress of feminist research, and kept it away from controversial issues. This does not mean, however, that some of the research work we looked at did not tackle intimate issues with extreme sensitivity, or did not use modern research methods to address a wide variety of mentalities and stereotypes.

I wanted to draw attention to the need to criticize various departure points and objectives, especially in light of the fast-spreading conservative trends that have helped tighten cultural constrictions even further, and lowered the ceiling of topics and analyses. The question that remains, however, is: How can we loosen the cultural noose to allow feminist studies and thought to expand the rights and freedoms of citizens? What would it take to reassess feminism in the light of new realities on the ground? Feminist studies should examine psycho-cultural elements, and refocus on the researcher herself.

We thus notice the confusion between women's existentialist dimensions and those that delineate sexual identity; and the more we wonder about the obstacles that impede the self's discovery of itself and of others, the more involved we are in multilayered analyses that reveal how women test the circumstances that help form their identity. This helps us understand why these studies do not advance or contribute effectively to changing the condition of women, including the researcher, the '*moi – feminine*'. Thus criticizing daily practices and addressing gender identity requires that we uncover the truth, which is disguised by cultural dissimulation. This is one of the irrational aspects of our socio-cultural and political system, which ends up preventing the emergence of the knowing self, and limiting the strength and further development of feminist activism. By linking the female researchers' gender identity to their research, we encounter a feminist theoretical construction.

The imagination that cultures engender is a by-product of an interpretation particular to the self, the other and the world, an interpretation governed by the individual's cultural facets (her religion, ideology, history, art, the law, customs, traditions and family relations). In this network of culture-generated imaginations of women, the imagined intertwines with the real, since they exist in a single domain. The imagined is not necessarily a figment of the imagination; it is the outcome of a set of practices, attitudes, texts and discourse that help form the imagination. When we search for women in Arab culture, we actually search in the imagined because as a subject it is almost beyond the reach of observation and interpretation, and moves within the discourse without supervision. This is where the importance of studying this subject lies, and where the remedy begins. This form of representation does not mean escaping the bitter and

painful reality that is women's lives; reality is itself linked to an imagined world that is not only a set of images and illusions.

## **Understanding the forbidden and the permitted**

Women researchers in Lebanon have not breached the social peripheries of forbidden areas, and thus have helped keep the restrictions of subject matter in place. They also have not gone far beyond masculine borders. For example, they have not addressed how women in Lebanon live their daily lives in a sectarian system, what sectarianism means to them, or how they deal with it in the management of their professional and private affairs. How does it affect the way they perceive various public and personal issues? Researchers have not addressed how women understand and live religion, or what position it occupies in their public and private lives. They also have not addressed the presence or absence of the state in women's lives, or how this is perceived. How can we arrive at an understanding of women's social conditions if we do not analyse our own attitudes and understanding of these basic issues? These would show that the patriarchal cultural constrictions are as tight as ever. The rejection of the trinity *state, sects and religion* is problematic, because if these three pillars do not harbour enmity towards women, they at least have never seriously tried to improve their lot, change the laws that affect their economic and family lives, or involve them in their country's public, political and strategic affairs. The sects impede the functioning of the state and, in turn, fear losing their own authority. Women researchers have not studied the impact of the absence of democratic laws that regulate women's private and family lives on the lives of women and their children, nor how this absence can lead to violent relationships in which women are most often the victims. They have not studied how Lebanese women, like their men, have been paying allegiance to the leader, with no political rights to show for this, or why the sects rely on them for votes, but not as valid participants in decision-making (a few studies do exist on the subject, but only scratch the surface). Why are we still useful as a mass to gather at public celebrations, but not in defence of our rights?

The fact that feminist studies have not deconstructed the masculine core of public institutions to arrive at a new theoretical and practical understanding has allowed the continuing marginalization of women. It has

also tightened the cultural constrictions that hamper women and waste their potential, despite the appearance of new positive signs of their growing involvement in private institutions, as writers and so on.

Feminism is not simply a set of scientific research tools, but also attempts to find the truth/reality about our world or, at least, to come as close as possible to it. The best bet is to grant existing feminist theories the power to intervene, give the female researcher a clear role in criticizing negative phenomena in our world and restore to feminism its critical value.

Women researchers seem to be constantly defending their research, and busy proving women's qualitative presence in the public and private domains, in the past and the present. They are anxious to reveal their many roles, and the changeability and variety of these roles, in order to dispel the singular view of women and prove their ability, diligence, involvement in a wide variety of specializations and professions, and their emotional and financial ability to run their family affairs. However, negative consistency adversely affects women's access to the political, cultural, social and economic decision-making circles (i.e. their partnership in the political system and state institutions). It also adversely affects the formulation of a Personal Status Law in line with the new position taken by women, and the formulation of an optional civil code regarding marriage and the right to naturalize their spouses and children. This is how a struggle ensues between the private, the institutional and the legislative; for while the private changes, it finds neither a new legal interpretation nor new institutional changes to reflect its own change. In general, the feminist researchers' view of the role that the law, state institutions and the central authority play in their lives is still ambiguous. Do we, as women researchers who regard ourselves as critics, understand and conceive of that fact like the rest of the Lebanese population that got used to feeling stronger than the law or disregarding it, choosing to live without laws and replacing them with their own, in their capacity as warring factions?

There is a contradiction in Lebanon between science, culture and major art forms, at the production level, and the vision of the political framework as defined by the militias, sects and a state with limited rights. We live in a state of respect for the latter, and for its laws and employees, but fear the militias and their dictates, and the sects and their decisions, even more. The struggle between these different levels has affected feminist studies by making them more conservative and compliant. Nevertheless, the value of

feminism lies in expanding its ideas and spreading it wider through various outlets; this is the essence of feminist thought when it is liberated from its singular focus or masculine centrality. It is said that Derrida branded himself and his intellect as 'femininity', because he wanted to extract philosophy from absolute ambition and allow it to spread through its multiple courses.

Women fear rejection, which is why they accept a low status and adopt a conservative discourse. We have also noticed that whenever women raise their heads and demands, the men in their lives (especially their fathers) have had a hand in it.

Have feminists become accustomed to remaining on the sidelines as an expression of disgust with humiliating conditions, and thus begin digging labyrinths to find underground sources and follow them to their ultimate outlet? Working in underground labyrinths is what prisoners and resistance fighters do; are we doomed to remain in this paradoxical condition?

### **The system of beliefs, the locus of weakness and strength**

Feminist studies have contributed to the development of thought regarding women, and of new visions about them and the world they live in. However, cultural constrictions still stifle the role of feminist thought and restrict socio-cultural behaviour patterns and applications even further. Is the role of feminism limited to giving femininity a new meaning, and unveiling its dimensions and the levels of awareness about it? I believe that the problem with feminist studies lies in the researcher's system of beliefs, and that awareness of this fact and bringing it out into the open is the way to change it and replace it with another, more in line with women's constantly renewed desires.

The system of beliefs is the locus of weaknesses and strengths. Quantum physics showed us that there is no objective world beyond the one seen by the observer, because the world we study is the one we have etched in our mind, and not necessarily the living world that is constantly changing. Thus, if we as women stop seeing ourselves as victims, and stop viewing our suffering as a sign of victimhood but as part of who we are as human beings, we will be replacing one condition with another that reflects unexpected and unconscious abilities and strengths, waiting for an opportunity to actualize themselves in a positive atmosphere. I therefore

propose that we view women from outside the context of male domination; we have borne this context in mind for over a century, and developed it from patriarchy to neo-patriarchy to masculinity and so forth. What would happen if we procedurally abandoned this perception and looked at ourselves outside it? We would perhaps find that it was actually the tightly wound noose around our understanding of ourselves, the other and our societies!

We create our own self-image, and are the creative force behind it, so why do we reconcile ourselves to subconscious beliefs we inherited from others, beliefs that have become so deeply rooted in our lives? Today, scientific research has proved that genes can be altered by reprogramming them, since life lies in the process of change. The strange thing is that we do not link our thoughts to our bodies, for if we look closely at our body, we would find that 99 per cent of it is changeable; the skin changes every month and the skeletal structure every three months, for example. This change occurs without either our awareness or our permission; we neither pay attention to the process nor link it to our thoughts and beliefs, although nothing is constant save for it. We are the image of change, though the fact that we do not know it remains the main impediment to our understanding. This is why changing our image of ourselves, and our beliefs, is entirely permitted and possible by virtue of our very nature, since everything in life is changeable.

There is no world beyond the viewer's perspective: when the viewer's perspective changes the world changes as well. The problem lies in the awareness; when we change our awareness, we ourselves will change, as will the world we perceive. This would mean relinquishing the theses of masculinity, paternalism, patriarchy and all that ensues from them, and changing our own beliefs and self-awareness. It also means giving up the image of victimhood, lamentations, revolutions and blaming the other, whether a person or an institution, and opening our awareness to allow our mind to keep up with our body in a diligent process of change, whereby tomorrow I will no longer be the person I am today, nor will the other or my world. Only when there is harmony between mind and body, and both start changing together away from internal struggles, will our studies about ourselves and our societies become transparent, flexible and aware. At that point, we will no longer require the term 'feminism'.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Lebanese University, Bahithat.

1. Noha Bayoumi (2006), '*alBahitha walBahth alNiswi*' (The researcher and research on feminism), *al-Bahrain al-Thaqafiya*, 12(45) (July), pp. 8–30.

2. Adnan Houballah (2004), *altahleel alnafsi walunutha: min freud ila lacan* (Psychoanalysis and Femininity: From Freud to Lacan), the Arab Centre for Psychological and Analytical Research (Beirut: al-Farabi).

3. Ibid., pp. 9–10.

4. Ibid., p. 18.

5. Carl Jung (1997), *Analytical Psychology*, translated by Nuhad Khayyata (Damascus: Dar al Hiwar), p. 242.

6. Noha Bayoumi (1995), *almusawah bayna haymanat qanoon al'adat wa qosour almu'assassat, musawah, tanmiya, salam...* (Equality Between Dominant Customs Laws and the Shortcomings of Institutions: Equality, Development, Peace...) (Beirut: Institute of Women's Studies in the Arab World), pp. 28–43.

7. Noha Bayoumi, '*tajribat alnajah almihani walmali lada alshabat allubnaniyat*' (The successful professional and financial experience of young Lebanese women), *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 13 (2008–9), pp. 275–303.

8. Noha Bayoumi, '*almar'a, almadina, alsiyasa*' (Women, the city and politics), *Bahithat* (Journal of the Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 4 (1997–8), pp. 246–73.

9. Noha Bayoumi, '*alnisal waltahawolat alsiyasiya fil bahrain: alsiyasa was hijab alwaqa'*' (Women and political transformations in Bahrain: politics and the veil of reality), *hiwar al-arab*, Beirut, July 2005.

10. Noha Bayoumi, '*hal taghayyara alhob am taghayyarat sardiyatuhu? alriwaya allubnaniya namouthajan*' (Did love change or did its narrative change? The Lebanese story as example), *Ishraqat* (2002–3) (Bahrain: Sheikh Ibrahim bin Mohammad al-Khalifah Centre for Culture and Research), pp. 145–92.

11. '*masarat alhob bayna almutakhayal walmaash, abhath wa shihadat*' (The paths of love between imagination and experience: research and testimonies), *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 8 (2002–3).

12. Noha Bayoumi, '*siyar al-nisa*', '*anhunna wa min dounihunna*' (Women's biographies, about them and without them), *Nuzwa*, 20 (October 1999), pp. 103–14.

13. '*althukoura walubuwa alyom: tafkeek mafhoum althuoura almuaymanna*' (Deconstruction of masculinity and patriarchy in contemporary society), *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 12 (2006–7).

14. Ibid., p. 7.

15. Ibid., p. 79.

16. Ibid., p. 16.

17. Biography of cross-border motherhood: a mother's letters to her son, in 'Excavations and investigations: lives of Arab women', *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 11 (2005–6), pp. 12–46.

18. '*hafriyyat wa taharriyyat: hayawat nisa*' '*arabiyyat*' (Out of the shadows: Investigating the lives of Arab Women), *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 11 (2005–6), p. 10.

19. Simantini Niranga (2005), '*aljins fi wajhayhi alaam walkhas, fi: mafaheem alamiya, altathkeer wal ta'neeth (algender)*' (The two faces of sex, the private and the public), in *Global Concepts, Masculinity and Femininity (Gender)* (Beirut: The Arab Cultural Centre), pp. 121–53.



20. Ibid., p. 63.

## CHAPTER 9

# The Creative Arab Woman: Opposing the Stereotypical Image and Dismantling the Prevalent Discourse\*

*Fawzia Abdullah Abu-Khaled\*\**

### Introduction

My study does not address the image of women in men and women's literary work for one important reason, which is the sheer number of works that address this particular issue. Among these is a United Nations study on the subject (*The Image of Women in Arab Novels and Stories*), which is part of a series on Arab women in development, by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA). Many of these studies contain detailed descriptions and disparate analyses, and arrive at almost identical conclusions. I therefore found it necessary not to hide women's image, as it appears in Arab women's creative literary work, from other women. This image, in particular, is part of reality and capable, together with its details, of unveiling women's attitude towards their situation and relationships, whether by further entrenching it or deviating from it. By departing from the focus that various analyses of the image of women usually centre on, I wanted to find out how similar or different the image was as depicted by creative writers from the public cultural vision, and its concomitant discourse. I also wanted to know whether these writers are capable of influencing the formation of this image in the collective emotional memory, and of proposing an alternative image.

Based on this approach, several questions come to mind:

1. What is the image of Arab women embedded in the collective emotional memory, and to what extent does it contribute to making women the discarded or invisible 'others'?
2. Does the literary creativity of women produce a new humane and 'feminist' image of women, different from the socially prevalent stereotypical one in the prevalent discourse, which is based on a uniform view of women, and which justifies the unfair social imbalance, blaming it on biological differences?
3. What does the new alternative image of women, configured by creative women writers, look like?
4. Has women's creativity in the Arab world succeeded in producing an independent feminist discourse which is linked to the desired social and political discourse characterized by its diverse voices, in lieu of the prevalent, monophonic discourse divided into conflicted dualities? Or does this new creativity turn its back on feminism, and borrow from the language of the established discourse?

### **The image of women embedded in the collective emotional memory**

The image of women deeply embedded in the collective emotional memory is not the image of women only as seen from a male perspective, or one that men have formed unilaterally, but is embedded as well in women's own mindsets, and is one that they themselves have helped establish. They did that either by submitting to the repressive authority that they helped produce, by not intervening to create an alternative image or, at least, by not publicly declaring their disagreement with (or difference from) the established authority. What then is this image of women so deeply embedded in the collective emotional memory, and how is it linked to the representation, rather than merely the idealization, of women?<sup>1</sup>

Many researchers have tried to draw out women's image from the social history and cultural vision of Arab society. However, the result has been as many images and justifications as there were efforts, although researchers increasingly reach conclusions that coincide but do not agree. These conclusions centre round the notion that the image of women in the collective memory reflects a particular cultural vision that reduces their humanity and femininity down to narrow and derogatory images:

[It is] difficult to draw out the social image of the Arab woman from the cultural heritage, especially as it reached us, unclear and ambiguous. Traditional culture finds in the image of women either a mysterious and bizarre human being, or a symbol of sin and seduction; she is also a symbol of honour and integrity, all values beyond time and place.<sup>2</sup>

The marginalization of women's attempts to produce any other image, and the act of preventing them from creating their own, was as good as keeping them away from the domain of knowledge production,<sup>3</sup> which is why this image is coloured with absence and alienation.

In his critical thesis on women and language, Abdullah al-Ghathami offers a number of women's images, taken from among those considered examples of women in the *jahiliya* (pre-Islamic) era.<sup>4</sup> In them, we can find one of the sources of the prevalent image of the woman as the Other, distant and distanced at the same time, in the labyrinth of the collective memory. This source becomes important when viewed in the Arab social context, which never dared make a clean break with this antiquated model. The proof is that writers nostalgically return to the *jahiliya* period whenever there is an attempt to deviate from this image in the many instances of historical transformation that Arab society has witnessed.<sup>5</sup>

According to al-Ghathami, these images alternate, are alone or present all together in the image of a newborn female buried alive at birth, the beloved, the queen and the statue. We can add to the list another image, depicted by many Arab women writers, however plaintively, of the sinner and seductress. To women writers, writing itself becomes a kind of cunning scheme to obstruct coercion, to resist and challenge the pain of exclusion.

If, like Fatima Mernissi, the researcher succeeds in finding in various literary works that trace the history of women opposite and probably fairer images of women, of their human potential and their social duties, such as Ibn Saad's *tabaqat alkubra* (The Large Social Classes), Ibn Hazem's *ummahat alkhulafa'* (The Caliphs' Mothers) and Bin Tayfour's *balaghat alnisa'* (Women's Rhetoric),<sup>6</sup> these images would reflect an aspect very well concealed in the collective memory.

## **Between images that reconcile and images that contradict**

Due to the overlap between the questions that this study poses, I tried to delineate and analyse the organic and dialectic linkages in the formation of alternative image/images of women, in the literary works of some Arab

women writers, regardless of how similar or different they are to the stereotypical image. I am convinced, however, that creative writing in itself is an act of rebellion, not only in the aesthetic or imaginative sense, but in the social sense as well. Therefore, pondering the question as to whether women's literary creativity offers a new image of women different from the stereotypical one will not lead us to a definitive answer, if the analysis of some of the images produced by this literary creativity is anything to go by. Analyses of several works indicate contrasting possibilities that can be viewed from several angles. The images are many and varied; some are excessive, some are perverted; some are false and competitive, while others are critical and deconstructive; and some are concessionary and conciliatory.

### **Is the image a frozen moment in time or the act of sculpting the memory?**

In this research, and for procedural reasons, I confined a number of the images of Arab women to the way I viewed and understood them, from among a sample of creative narrative and poetic works by writers from different Arab countries, going back to the early 1960s. These images are of the fighter, the dispossessed, the rebel and the multifaceted, complex woman.

#### *The fighter*

The image of the woman fighter (one struggling for rights) has relatively long historical roots in modern Arab writing, whether by men or women. This literature shows multiple images of the woman fighter, and a diversity that was long ignored, silenced or discarded from among the academic definitions of 'the fighter'. At first, the image of the woman fighter, the secret of whose effective resistance, on several fronts, was explored by the Palestinian writer Ghassan Kanafani, and came in the shape of the ragged but noble Um Saad in his eponymous novella. Like Maxim Gorki's 'The Mother', this Palestinian woman became a universal symbol of the female struggler. Um Saad's features and considerable height, forged by the dual challenge of work and hope, was understood and explained at the same time

as the image of the simple yet harsh daily struggle of Arab women who, like Um Saad, live in Palestinian refugee camps, or in other camps strewn across the Arab world's countrysides, deserts and coastal areas, from the Atlantic to the Gulf. This image of the fighter signalled the birth of a new creative vision of Arab women to which Arab writers, whether men or women, had hardly paid attention prior to the late 1960s.

In that same period, another image superimposed itself on the stereotypical image of the Arab woman, though this time from a new angle. Thus, after the Arab male poet was the only one allowed to flaunt his heroism and write narrowly focused mono-dimensional poems about his adventures, a female poet dared force her way like a commando into the pioneering field of prose poetry at a relatively early stage. Amal Jarrah's poetry collection, *rasa'el imra'ah dimashqiyah li fida'i filastini* (A Damascene Woman's Letters to a Palestinian Commando Fighter, 1970), came to spearhead a form of linguistic and cultural invasion of the stereotypical image of women. It is important to note that these attempts to portray a new image of Arab women were directly linked to the growth of the literature of resistance on the Palestinian cultural scene, and caused its contagion to spread, in varying degrees, to other cultural scenes and to modern literature across the Arab world. In other words, the image of the woman fighter was born from the womb of the Arab liberation struggle. A review of the creative literary participation of Arab women authors from the maghreb region shows that the work of these authors was also deeply influenced by the national liberation movements and their fallout. It also shows that, in its proud and provocative nature, this female participation could not be differentiated from the movements' attitudes or what the current discourses concealed, until decades after the liberation of the maghreb countries.<sup>7</sup>

In modern Arab women's writing, we find the image of a woman who puts her life on the line, and who appears not as a victim, but as one who undertakes a 'heroic' act, the result of her free will and the choice of a woman conscious, able and ready to assume full responsibility for her actions. In this image, the woman commits her militant act with deliberate intent and prior knowledge, and she does it whether required to carry a Kalashnikov, distribute pamphlets, join a political party or engage in any other form of struggle.

In this context it is worth mentioning the early and pioneering experience of Latifa al-Zayyat, who wrote many narrative works on this subject. Among these is her novel *albab almaftouh* (The Open Door, 1960), which ends with a sketch of the woman fighting not only a social struggle, but one on the military front as well. The heroine of the story joins the popular resistance in Port Said during the tripartite invasion of Egypt.

If Hamida Na'na's novel *alwatan fi al'aynayn* (The Nation in Our Eyes), written in the 1970s, when people were obsessed with the image of the super-heroic woman symbolized by Leila Khaled, is one of the earliest examples of the woman fighter, in both the political and military sense, Alia Mamdouh's novel *alghulamah* (The Slave) offers us yet another image of the fighter. It is the image of a humane fighter, far from the idealistic vision and haughty symbolism of combat and military heroism.

Other worthy contributions include Sahar Khalifeh's novels, especially *alsubbar* (Wild Thorns, 1976) and *obbad alshams* (Sunflowers, 1984), as well as the images depicted in her later work, like *bab alsaha* (The Door to the Courtyard, 1990), and *rabee' har* (A Hot Spring, 2004). Anyone who studies Sahar's female characters up to the 1990s cannot but notice that despite her efforts to show the steely face of the woman fighter, as she does in *obbad alshams*, a careful review reveals a certain early doubt in the absolutist nature of the heroic image. This helps another image to emerge from beneath the cloak of Khalifeh's female fighter, that of the multifaceted/fragmented woman, which I will address later on.

Other Arab writers added new visions to the image of the fighter, among which are the romantic heroine, the mother, the woman in love, and the domineering, fanatical, betrayed and broken woman. The humanization of the image of women in creative literature is a success for the effort of Arab authors to uproot the 'holy angelic image', with its stereotypical heritage, from the collective emotional memory.

### *The dispossessed*

Except in very few cases, no narrative literature, whether the short story, novel, biography or memoir, is completely free of the image of the dispossessed woman. Poetry also is not free of what Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyousi calls '*alarhaq aljamali*', aesthetic exhaustion, from the repeated

use of this image. We find that its constant reproduction has, on the one hand, inoculated the collective emotional memory against it, or against the impact of the core grievances it expresses. On the other hand, fallout from the image's impact on the collective memory coincides with images of the weak and sinful woman of the *jahiliya* period, an image that can only be ascribed to the biological nature of femininity. This in turn created a parallel reaction, namely a kind of addiction to the dispossession depicted in this image.

Among the variations on the theme of the dispossessed Arab woman, we find that the Saudi novelist, Qamashah al-Olayan, in her novel *ontha al'ankabout* (The Female Spider, 2000), has remained extremely faithful to the literal meaning of the Saudi proverb, 'Break one of the girl's ribs and she will grow ten others'. This is not said in the positive sense to mean that women's ribs have the ability to regenerate like the legendary phoenix's rise from the ashes, but rather the opposite, as the grim narrative of this novel confirms. The image of the woman plagued by endless forms of dispossession forces itself on the story, from the novel's first words up to and beyond the final scene. It is as if the girl in the story is mentally deranged and possessed, like in the poem '*hawiyya*' ('Identity') from the collected poems in *ma' alsarab* (Mirage Water).

In her 1990s collection *aldol' heena stawa* (The Rib when it Ripens), Omaina al-Khamis gives us another image of the dispossessed woman. It is the image of a woman who dares, both through her dispossession and in spite of her desperate circumstances, to show women's relationship with the crooked rib, if only in the dream world which contradicts the collective memory. Through the title of her collection, the writer tries to shock the established social notion of the 'crooked rib', by intimating that the symbolic rib is ripened rather than crooked. This is another variation on the theme of the dispossessed woman, and shows the extent to which women writers themselves have had their fill of reproducing the state of dispossession, perhaps in an attempt on their part to replace this image with new visions.

*The rebel*



Several critics, including Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul,<sup>8</sup> name Nazek al-Mala'eka as the first poet to depart from the traditional form of Arabic poetry, and write a *taf'ila* poem, which makes her a creative, rebel pioneer in the modern history of literature, a literary parallel to the social rebel. However, Colette Khoury was one of the first Arab novelists to draw the preliminary features of the literary and social rebel in Arab narrative, specifically in her first novel *ayyam ma'ahu* (Days with Him, 1958). Colette Khoury no doubt tried, through this and her second novel *layla wahida* (The Only Night, 1961), to create the image of the woman rebel and thus supplant the stereotypical image. It is worth noting, however, that the image of the rebel woman never remains as consistent as that which it is meant to replace.

In the context of the search for the early features of the rebel woman, we must mention Latifa al-Zayyat's narrative experience in this regard, including her novel *albab almaftouh* (The Open Door, 1960), which gave us images of both the fighter and the rebel.

This circle of descriptive imagery expanded; many novels, stories and poems by Arab women writers helped to varying degrees to draw the portrait of the rebel woman. Among these works are Laila Baalbaki's *ana ahyia* (I Live, 1958), Fathiya al-Assal's *beit alta'a* (The House of Obedience, 1962) and Nawal El Saadawi's very important novel *muthakarat tabiba* (Memoirs of a Woman Doctor, 1967). Other literary works helped engrave the early features of the rebel woman by portraying various aspects of rebellion, including demands that sometimes led to the brink of conflict, such as the demand for individual freedom and an equal relationship with men, as well as various other efforts to redraw the feminine self and thus supplant the existing stereotype.

It is important, however, in the context of addressing the rebel Arab woman's *image*, to ponder the experience of writing poetry, especially in light of the fact that several works by Arab female poets have depicted different images of the rebel using creative forms of verse. Venturing into the domain of poetic renewal, and deviating from the centuries-old rules of poetry set by al-Khalil bin Ahmad, women poets helped draw the rebel woman's image, though they did so in a very low key. Female poets like Malak Abdel-Aziz, especially in her first collection *aghani alsubbar* (Cactus Songs, 1959), and Suad al-Sabbah, in particular her two works *fil bade' kanat aluntha* (In the Beginning Was the Female, 1988) and *alqasida*

*untha* (Poetry is a Female, 1999), at different times laid the foundations of the image of the rebellious Arab woman.

The poet Fadwa Toukan was the first to give us multiple images of the rebellious woman, using a particular poetic form, and she portrayed in her poetry the nationalistic rebellion by women against Israeli occupation. The image of her feminine rebellion turned this woman, who was a prisoner in her own house and was prevented from going to school when she was barely 13 years old, into a symbol throughout the Arab world, from the Atlantic to the Gulf, and with it she drew schoolgirls away from the stereotypical image to which they would otherwise have been held up.

We cannot end this section about the generation that began forming the rebel woman's image in the early 1960s before passing the torch to future generations of Arab women writers without referring to the work of three women, considered among the founders of modern poetry, both in its *taf'ila* and prose forms. One of them is the Palestinian poet Salma al-Jayyousi, a contemporary of Fadwa Toukan, in her poetry collection *al'aouda ila manba' alhilm* (Return to the Source of the Dream, 1960). Another is the pioneering Iraqi poet Lamia' Abbas 'Amara, who gave us a further example of poetic rebellion in her collection *alzawiya alkhaliya* (The Empty Corner, 1959), and other collections. Two others stand out: the prose poetry of Saniya Saleh, who wrote during the period of poetic renewal; and the poet Amal Jarrah, who through many of her poems looked deep into the daily lives of women, and her own personal physical pain.

Ghada al-Samman's work could be considered, first in the creative short story then in a variety of genres, including poetry, a distinctive mark in the development of the features of the rebellious woman, its daring and crystallization.<sup>9</sup> Al-Samman delved in social and aesthetic adventures by presenting the image of the rebellious woman in its different forms. These ranged from physical disobedience and spiritual recalcitrance, to deconstructing the memory and destroying the apparent and hidden obstacles between the vast possibilities in writing and the low social ceiling, like a metal helmet ready to close in on the writer's head.

The year 1967 was a watershed one in the Arab maghreb as well as the mashreq, and certainly during the following two decades, due to the large number of creative women and the experiences written about in the short story, novel and poetry. Among the women writers in the maghreb were

Zeinab al-A'waj (Algeria), Fawzia Chalabi (Libya), 'Oroussiya al-Nalouti and Wafa' 'Omran (Tunisia) and Malika al-'Assi (Morocco).<sup>10</sup>

### *The versatile, multifaceted woman*

To arrive at any conclusion regarding this woman's features – including her appearance, because she is forever reconfiguring her identity – we cannot but say that it is an image more worth seeking in the formation than the completion, and in the what-will-be rather than in the what-was. This image is not only contrary to the stereotypical image of women, it is even different from the newer images mentioned above. A multifaceted image denotes less-established meanings and is probably more evasive, therefore more amenable to transformation and to slipping away. This is because it is not sufficient to replace the image of women currently embedded in the collective memory, as a sacred or impure model, with one that is equally not free of idealistic symbolism, such as that of the dispossessed, the fighter or the rebel woman. The image of the multifaceted woman does not simply replace one established image with another, but goes beyond this to provoke the memory into deviating from its very framework, thus changing both image and framework.

A review of various research projects that have helped unveil a diversified and complex image of women in Arab women writers' work allows us to discern a number of fragmentations, splits, divisions, contrasts and contradictions. The prevalent political, social and cultural discourse is still trying to protect the collective memory's infrastructure from the shattering power of this multifaceted image, embodied in different forms of fragmentation between:

- the individual and the group;
- belonging and alienation;
- the self and the Other;
- creative freedom and the trap of social position;
- various time periods: past, present and future;
- form and content as expressed by the writer's creativity in its attempt to conform to reality, and to literary genres;
- gender relations;

- women;
- the writer's selves, and her inner division – between the emotional and the mental;
- the public and the private; and
- a prevalent, established discourse and one still being formed.

It is important to note that although one could easily find the particular features of this diversified and complex image in many works, beginning in the 1990s, some are discernible in earlier periods, such as Ihsan Kamal's *sijen amlokohu* (The Prison I Own, 1971). At a later stage, Sahar Khalifeh's novel *muthakarat imara'ah ghair waqi'ya* (Memoir of an Unrealistic Woman, 1992) depicted a clearer picture of the complex Arab woman, most clearly evident in the state of fragmentation between her public and the private states. Earlier on, Arab women writers did not hesitate to hide the details of their world, considering it marginal and incapable of dislodging the stereotypical image.

Beginning in the 1990s, the tendency of a new generation (in terms of creativity rather than age) of female authors to flaunt the multifaceted image of the Arab woman in their literary work became quite noticeable.

Each novel in Ahlam Mustaghanemi's trilogy – *thakirat aljasad* (Memory in the Flesh, 1993), *fawda alhawas* (Chaos of the Senses, 1997) and *'aber sareer* (Passing Through a Bed, 2003) – gives us a different image of fragmentation – even if the chisel used varies in its sharpness when peeling off the thick and chronic layers of memory. It is an image that tries to destroy, or at least disturb, the settled ease of the prevalent discourse and of the image of women in both their stereotypical and subsequent forms. The woman, in Ahlam Mustaghanemi's work, is not Djamilia Bouhoueid, the female resistance fighter in the Algerian Revolution and later the rebel. Rather, by referring to Algeria and to the city of Constantine in particular, she is embodying successive cases of transformation of several forms of fragmentation. The most severe of these fragmentations, in all three novels, involves the element of time, between, on the one hand, the time of Algeria's struggle for independence and the date of its betrayal, and, on the other, a present wavering between apostasy and mysterious flashes from an implied future.

The complex image of women also appears, with its fragmentations and divisions, in the Iraqi Batoul al-Khodari's two novels, *kambadat alsama'*

*qariba* (How Close the Sky Seemed, 2003) and *ghiyab* (Absence, 2004). In her first novel, Batoul al-Khodari reveals three layers of fragmentation: the cultural fragmentation between East and West, namely between Europe and the Arab world; the fragmentation between life in rural Iraq and life in Baghdad; and the sharp and intimate divisions in the relationship between a mother and her daughter. In *ghiyab*, the variegated image appears in the fragmentation of the middle class under the weight of the international sanctions against Iraq, the sectarian divide in the secret relationship between a Muslim girl and a Christian man, who nevertheless belong to the same social milieu; between a woman and the Other, in the context of their belonging to different cultural backgrounds; and in both unity and alienation. In *almutarjima* (The Translator, 2003), by Sudanese novelist Laila Abdul-‘Ola, we find a multifaceted woman who excels in flaunting her sense of cultural fragmentation, and the manner of addressing it, based on the model of al Tayeb Saleh’s novel *mawsem alhijra ila alshimal* (Season of Migration to the North), published in the early 1970s. However, while the self-image in al Tayeb Saleh’s novel reflects only one facet, awe of the other, and points to only one direction as a way out of the stigma of backwardness, following in the footsteps of this Other, even if it means killing the adversary, or dying like him, Leila Aboulela depicts the multifaceted woman as an individual capable of using fragments to make inroads into herself and the Other, at the same time. She does this through a dialogue that narrows the distance between the position of the West and that of the margins and, thus, dissents from the Orientalist discourse from within, without hesitating to admit the defects in Arab and Islamic societies.

In her novel *wajhat albousala* (The Direction of the Compass, 2002), Saudi author Noura al-Ghamdi reveals another form of the multifaceted Arab woman. For while the compass indicates what seems like a road with a dead end, alternative avenues emerge as possibilities by opening chinks in the social wall separating not between the worlds of men and women, but between one woman and another, and between women and the outside world.

We cannot fail but notice how the image of the multifaceted Arab woman is turning into an ever-expanding current. Haifa Zingana, for instance, in her novel *nisa’ alsafar* (Women in Travel, 2001), tries to address this through various layers of Iraqi society, to reveal the accumulated

fragmentations within. We thus see, in different places and circumstances, the Kurdish face of Iraqi women side by side with their Arab face.

Alia Mamdouh's novel *almahboubat* (The Beloved Women, 2003) makes a similar inference about the multifaced image of Arab women, though from a different angle. Although they each have their different personalities and backgrounds, the beloved women of the title are no more than the living embodiment of the complex woman in her feminist and humane visions. The latter is trying to peer through the cracks in the discourse, with the hope of dismantling the prevalent stereotype, and taking on the challenge of creating a new image.

We also find early signs of the multifaceted Arab woman's image in poetry. Rabi'a Jalty from Morocco wrote, in the 1980s, a poem entitled 'Schizophrenia', in which she alludes to the split in the image of Arab women. Also, in one of Iman Mersal's poems, ambiguity and fragmentation arise among several identities, but she does not conceal her pleasure with these problems, because together they are one way of dismantling memory. Moreover, in one of Thuraya al-'Areed's poems, entitled '*istibahat alsukoon*' ('Violations of the silence'), the poet voices her misgivings on the meanings and significance of the complexities in her own self-image in the presence of the ever-present but silent single image embedded in the public memory.

## The final question

Why, after more than half a century of effort by Arab women writers to erase the stereotypical image embedded in the collective emotional memory, are we still unable to envision a liberated woman, made of flesh and blood, heart and mind, except through the cracks in the public cultural scene? The question remains unanswered despite successive attempts to deconstruct the discourse that protects the public infrastructure sheltering this image.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

1. Mohammad Barada (2002), '*an kitabat almar'a fil qarn al'ishreen*' (On women's writing in the twentieth century), *thakirat almustaqbal* (Future Memory: Encyclopaedia of Arab Women), G3

(Cairo: The Higher Council for Culture, The Noor Foundation), p. 4.

2. Jabouri Orabi (2005), 'Muslim women studies', available at [www.muslimwomenstudies.com](http://www.muslimwomenstudies.com), accessed 29 July 2013.

3. Noha Bayoumi (1998), '*almakbout fi zaman almaktoub*' (The hidden at the time of writing), in Hoda al-Saddah, Sumaya Ramadan and Omaira Abu Bakr (eds) *zaman alnisa' walthakira albadila* (The Era of Women and Alternative Memory) (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum), p. 23.

4. Abdullah al-Ghathami (2000), *almar'a wallugha: thaqafat alwahn: muqarabat hawla almar'a waljasad wallugha* (Women and Language: the Culture of Illusion, Approaches on Women, the Body and Language) (Beirut: The Arab Cultural Centre), p. 38.

5. Mu'jab al-Odwani (2000), '*almakan altalal biwasfihi bawabat alriwaya alarabiya*' (The antiquated nostalgic place as entry point to the Arab novel), *alnas aljadid*, 19 (Dar al-Khashrami, June), p. 133.

6. Fatima Mernissi (2000), *hal antom muhassanoun dod altahreem?* (Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood), translated by Nahla Beydoun (Casablanca: alfanak), p. 198.

7. Barada, '*an kitabat almar'a fil qarn al'ishreen*', p. 2.

8. Ferial Jabouri Ghazoul, '*almar'a aliraqiya fil qarn alishreen, nusf qarn*' (Iraqi women in the twentieth century, half a century), *thakirat almustaqbal: mawsu'at almar'a alarabiya* (Future Memory: The Arab Women's Encyclopaedia), G2, p. 234.

9. Samar Ruslan (1995), '*ghada alsamman wa rou'yat thalathah min alnuqqad*' (Ghada al-Samman and the views of three critics), *qawafel* (The Literary Club, Riyadh), p. 64.

10. Barada, '*an kitabat almar'a fil qarn al'ishreen*', pp. 4–6.

## CHAPTER 10

### Does Saudi Feminism Exist?\*

*Hatoon Ajwad el-Fassi\*\**

This chapter asks an existential question about Saudi feminism. It is a question foreign to Saudi society, even for Saudi academics, since not a single Saudi university has a department of feminist studies, women's studies or women's history. There are so far no research centres devoted to any of these subjects for many reasons, chief among which is the absence of independent non-governmental institutions, civil society and charitable women's organizations. Even the term 'gender' has negative connotations here because the fearful associate it with a plot by the United Nations and its organizations to Westernize Saudi Arab Muslim society, and break down its solidarity. The term is practically non-existent in Saudi Arabia, except among very small, specialized circles; but does this mean that Saudi feminism does not exist as well?

It is perhaps better to put the question thus: are Saudi women interested in feminism? My answer is that, although many Saudi women may never have heard of Simone de Beauvoir or *The Feminine Mystique*, news of the feminist movements in Egypt, Greater Syria, Iraq and the Gulf region that were part of the national liberation movements and the anti-colonial struggle, and maintained contact with the Arabian Peninsula through the hajj and trade, were carried by the Saudi, Egyptian, Lebanese and Iraqi newspapers and magazines to the farthest corners of the Peninsula. We should also not forget the role that radio has played in disseminating information to large swathes of Saudi society, among those who read and those who do not alike.

**That which is named and that which is understood**



When addressing this particular question we have to distinguish between what can be named, and what is simply understood. For while we cannot categorically determine the extent to which feminism or its use are widespread in Saudi Arabia, the concept of feminism as an awareness that there are discriminatory rules, notions and practices against women, regardless what names these are given, has always been there. Also, ever-present has been an awareness that this discrimination is mainly due to the dominant culture, the way religion is understood, and the behavioural patterns associated with customs and traditions.

As in other parts of the Arab world, though at different times, the issues of education and labour are the two main contributors to social and cultural change in the condition of Saudi women. They are also the main factors through which the role of women in society, the level of their participation and their awareness of their status and rights can be measured.

Many newspaper debates took place between men and women in which such things as women's education and work outside the home, without arguments from feminism or Western feminist movements, might have shed a positive light on the efforts of Saudi women. However, we are certainly not talking here about a comprehensive feminist movement, but about limited stands taken by women in different parts of the country, as individuals or small groups. I would like to refer here to an important article by Thoraya Qabel that drew attention to this early awareness, in her response to a 1959 article in *Quraish* magazine that described women as 'mentally and religiously deficient'.

Monitoring feminist awareness in Saudi Arabia should primarily be linked to writing, the forum of choice for self-expression. This does not mean, however, that we should ignore the experience of the many women who were deprived of education, or of the ability to read and write, although documentation of their oral history and experience acquired through resistance, education, work and participation in the public sphere is still limited. What they left behind is a testament to the wealth of their experience, and to the long and bitter struggle Saudi women went through to pave the way for our own generation and generations to come.<sup>1</sup>

When monitoring various levels of feminist awareness, we should look at the social discourse, at how it dealt with the cause of women, and how this cause provided an open forum for individual and social relationships of power and authority to express themselves, individually and collectively.

## **Women before the coming of formal education**

It is clear that educated women in the early stage of social development were primarily members of the upper and middle classes because many of the schools that existed then were private; alternatively, families sometimes sent their daughters abroad for their education. Women from these two classes benefited from their education and travel by coming into contact with other cultures, and learning about other women's experiences, which opened to them new avenues of knowledge and allowed them to interact with Arab and Islamic movements outside their immediate milieus.

However, from the time formal education was established and became available to everyone in the early 1960s, successive events in the region left their mark on Saudi history, and affected awareness and the reactions to them in different stages. The onset of education was an important stage, as were both the oil boom, which introduced modern materialism, and the religious revival that Islamized regime and society. The Gulf War had a different kind of importance because it Islamized women and the conflict surrounding them, and the second millennium was an important stage because it was linked to September 11 and the wave of reforms. Each of these stages needs to be separately studied, evaluated and analysed.

The first signs of revival began in the Hijazof in the 1930s, when the earliest feminist literature, excerpts from the diary of a Hijazi woman, was published by Ahmad al-Seba'i in 1934. This was followed by a number of articles written openly under women's names, the first in 1951, by Latifah al-Khatib, in the daily *al-bilad*. In the late 1950s, newspapers began devoting a page – most of which was written by women – to women's issues. The daily *Harra'*, owned by Professor Saleh Jamal, was the first to do so in 1957 (the page was entitled the *Women's Harra'*), which was edited by Nabila Khalil, followed in 1959 by Ahmad al-Subai'l's *Quraish* magazine, and Ahmad abdel-Ghafour 'Attar's *Okaz*.

## **The 1960s**

This period marks the beginning of women's formal education despite strong religious opposition from within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia that culminated in placing girls' education under the control of the Mufti and the religious establishment, to ensure that girls were brought up according to a

specific philosophy that required them to be obedient wives and good mothers. An unexpectedly large number of girls enrolled in formal education, and schools quickly spread throughout the Kingdom, as did teacher-training colleges. Eventually the 'General Directorate for Girls' Education' established higher education colleges for girls to allow them to assume leadership positions within the institution, and began giving Master and Doctoral degrees. The number of these colleges had risen to 102 by the time the independent status of the 'General Directorate for Girls' Education' came to an end, and it was merged in 2002 with what we know today as the 'Ministry of Education', which controlled the education of boys. The spread of public education had a strong impact on writing and self-expression by creating a nucleus of well-read women and female writers from all the social classes, rather than just one.

The 1960s witnessed feminist stirrings that could be seen as paving the way for future stages, and, although limited in scope, they were echoes of events unfolding on the international feminist scene. The middle of the decade witnessed the formation of a Saudi women's association under the name 'The Saudi Arab Women's Union', with an elected board of directors and president. The post of president went to author Samira Khashoggi, who in 1965 headed the Saudi al-Nahda Women's Association, which she established in 1962 along with Muthaffar Adham, Princess Sarah al-Faysal and her sister Princess Latifa. Samira Khashoggi also headed the al-Jazeera Cultural Girls' Club and its library in Riyadh, the capital, and news of her election was posted in the daily *Yamama*, on 2 April 1965. In that same year, Samira Khashoggi was also elected president of the Saudi Arab Women's Union.<sup>2</sup>

This same period also witnessed the establishment of a number of other associations, such as the Committee of al Sweilem's Saudi Girls School for Literature and Writing in Riyadh, which between 1960 and 1962 published a number of articles under the Committee's name, and a different girl's name for each article.

In the eastern region of the Kingdom, ARAMCO, the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, played an important role in opening the door for women's participation in the public sphere. Some women's associations benefited from the opportunity, however much that particular forum was rather 'fenced in', as Modawy al-Rashid termed it. Among these was the Thahran Women's Society, which had both Saudi and American female employees.

In the early 1980s, poet Badia Kashgari established and headed the Women's Arabic Speaking Group, which brought together a group of well-educated women, such as businesswoman Samia al-Idrissi, plastic artist Munira Mosly, architect Nayla Mosly, social expert Munira al-Mane' and activist Amina al-Jassem. For a certain time, the Group also published *Aseel* magazine.<sup>3</sup>

## **The 1970s**

The 1970s saw an economic boom that helped expand education and build more schools, institutes and universities. Among these was the University Studies Centre for Girls at King Saud University, founded in 1976, which helped expand formal education to include higher education, in order to prepare women for high positions in the education, health and social domains.

This enriched the base with increasing numbers of well-educated women, both readers and writers, and gave us a number of women academics specializing in feminist related subjects, or women whose studies in the 1970s and 1980s were based on feminist tenets. I recall from among these the names of Thoraya al-Turki in anthropology, Aisha al-Mane' in sociology, Fatina Shaker in sociology, Badia Kashgari in literature and translation, Suad al-Mane' in literary critique, Munira al-Nahed in sociology, Fawzia al-Bakr in the fundamentals of education, Aziza al-Mane' in curricula, Sharifa al-Shamlan in social services, Fawzia Abu Khaled in political sociology, Munira Mosly in plastic arts and Madiha al-'Ajroush in photographic art.

Feminism was not understood as an outward physical expression – like showing one's hair, face or body – despite the fact that feminism has a lot to do with a woman's relationship with her body, its identity and her attitude towards it. This was not an indicator in Saudi Arabia because a woman's appearance, especially outside the country, reflected her status, social class and openness to foreign societies.

The importance of a woman's outer appearance as an ideological position is associated with another group of Saudi women, who hail mainly from the eastern and middle provinces, involved in a leftist political movement that was banned in the early 1980s. In the period that preceded the oil boom, the rest of the country took a conciliatory attitude regarding whether to cover

more or less of a woman's body, an attitude that started to wane in the mid-1970s. This prompted a number of female poets to openly express their views on the right of women to make their own decisions, take control of their own lives and adopt whatever model they saw fit. A typical example of this trend was Fawzia Khaled's 1975 volume of poetry: *ila matta yakhtafounik laylat 'ursik* (Until When Will They Continue to Kidnap You on Your Wedding Night) and Badia Kashgari's *sourati wa ghairiha* (My Own Image and Others).

Feminist thought manifests itself best in the political positions of the Saudi feminist movement. Feminism is evident when women from different backgrounds take positions and engage in political activities that prove their existence and express their position vis-à-vis all that goes on around them, especially the Palestinian and other liberation causes in the Arab world, particularly in the Arabian Gulf region. Women have been engaging in literary, artistic, social or political activities across all regions of Saudi Arabia as far back as the 1960s, if not earlier. On the other hand, some women, like Khairiya al-Saqqaf, Jaheer al-Musa'ed and Nawal Bakhsh, called for rights through poetry and prose without necessarily taking any political positions.

We could also say in general that although the media's outlook was not necessarily feminist, it did voice demands and reflect its female employees' positions in its capacity as their window to the public, and the world at large.

## **The 1980s**

The 1980s marked the beginning of a more hard-line feminist discourse developed in response to events on the political scene early in the decade. Al-Haram al-Sharif (the Noble Sanctuary) in Mecca was attacked at the end of 1979 and occupied by a group led by Jheiman al-'Otaibi and Mohammad bin Abdalla al-Kahtani, who claimed to be the Mahdi (the Redeemer, who will come in the future). The two leaders and their 60 followers were executed in January 1980, but the ideology expressed in Jheiman al-'Otaibi's famous sermon, part of which addressed the status of women, called for more conservatism and for imposing restrictions on the media, and was gradually adopted by the government. In an interview with the satellite television station al-Arabiya on 14 July 2004, Prince Khaled al-

Faisal said: 'It was a mistake to destroy the group that committed Jheiman al-'Otaibi's crimes and ignore the ideology that stood behind it as if it never existed, allowing it thus to propagate throughout the country; it was a big mistake.'<sup>4</sup>

This is a very important admission, and the adoption of the ideology might even have been unintended. However, regardless of whether it was intended or not, the result was that it became reality, and more restrictions were imposed on the media and women. Fear of addressing women's issues was evident in texts and subjects to be included in school curricula; the texts warn of the dangers of intellectual invasion, especially that which seeks to Westernize and liberate Saudi women. From this moment up to the 1990s, a large number of booklets targeting women began to appear in schools, institutes, colleges, universities, hospitals, commercial centres, prayer areas and airports calling on them to tighten their *hijab*, stay at home and accept polygamy to help solve the problem of men who cannot control their instincts in public.

The 1980s also witnessed a conflict between different ideological schools that turned into a religious rivalry centring round modernity vs. conservatism. What is noteworthy in this two-party rivalry is that women became the main issue that each side saw as part of the literary and public discourses within the conflict.<sup>5</sup>

Various theories arose to explain the hard-line campaign against women; some linked it to the Kingdom's delicate political and economic circumstances at the time, as a result of the regional repercussions of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iran–Iraq War in 1980 and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the resistance to which greatly benefited from Saudi political and material support. Moreover, Saudi Arabia was experiencing an economic crisis at the time as a result of a drop in oil prices that negatively impacted many service, maintenance and infrastructure building projects. This put social issues on the back burner and allowed extremism to spread in schools, universities and the media.

## **The 1990s**

Then came the 1990s, the Second Gulf War and the reaction of some women to the ominous changes taking place in the country. These women decided to participate by protecting themselves by themselves. They

dismissed their foreign drivers and demonstrated their intentions by driving their own cars around the streets of Riyadh on 6 November 1990. For me, this moment marked the beginning of a new history for modern Saudi women by sharpening the feminist discourse, dividing society into several fronts and crystallizing a variety of positions on the issue. Three distinct positions emerged: one that supported the right of women to drive, one that opposed, and a middle position that supported this right but only outside the Kingdom. This variety in the positions led to different modes of implementation on the ground. The issue was dressed in religious garb and those who dared address it felt as if they were breaking a taboo. Those who remember the early 1990s cannot ignore the social struggle in which the subject of women was used as a tool and a means of venting anger, thus conspiring to keep the cause an object of contention.

Women adopted this extremist position, which associates religion with every social custom, in their journalism as well as in their religious discourse. But what have cars and driving them to do with our social customs, to be documented and rooted in our traditions?

Thus, the 1990s generated a different atmosphere for feminism, characterized by fear and restrictions on rights and self-expression. The women who drove their cars in Riyadh found themselves without jobs and under the threat of death or isolation, as did their husbands, fathers and those who sympathized with them. Preachers in mosques contributed to the effort by defaming women, then forbidding them from raising court cases against those who defamed them, despite the presence of witnesses and recorded evidence.

Despite the fact that women returned to their jobs and classes two and a half years later, the wound is still open, and society has not yet completely healed. Nor did the religious institutions forgive or choose to overlook those who dared challenge the status quo, even if it had nothing to do with religion. What is strange is that there is no documented evidence from that period, either from the historic or the social perspectives, and very few studies and articles dared broach this subject or feminism, especially after 1990, due to the long list of taboos involved. These taboos compelled women in general, and women writers in particular, to avoid addressing the subject openly, due, on the one hand, to the media blackout and, on the other, to the fear of being associated with those in disfavour. Very few voices dared come out in the open. What helped the 'crisis decade' last so

long was the infiltration and control of the media and education by the extremists, and the fact that the state turned a blind eye on their movements, allowing them to be the sole voices heard.

The stigma of being classified has persisted, and is still pursuing those who address women's issues or their rights. Their demands are distorted, and simplified, 'calling for women's liberation', words that carry a host of negative connotations. 'Women's liberation' means to the extremists liberation from morality, religion and sacred customs and traditions, and a call to emulate the Western women. The automatic comparison of liberation with sexual freedom, homosexuality and open social relations is a reflection of the contradictions brewing in our souls, for these have always been rejected in our society.

It is important to note that the decade of the 1990s was also one of internal political movements, when certain groups tried to establish legal religious institutions using provocative tactics to achieve their aims, which displeased the security establishment and led to the arrest of large numbers of people. However, these movements had the same hard-line views on women, and thus garnered no support from them. The open-mindedness that began in the mid-1990s motivated the local press to start opening up towards others, and to tolerate a louder women's voice.

## **The millennium**

The most important sign of change in the new millennium, as far as women are concerned, was the signing of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2000. The key factor is the ratification by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia of an international convention involving a series of commitments on women, in response to international pressure by the United Nations to improve its legal reputation. Eight years later, in January 2008, the country submitted its first report to the United Nations, which coincided with a shadow report by an anonymous group of Saudi women who called themselves 'Women for Reform'.<sup>6</sup>

With the events of 11 September 2001, the public started understanding for itself the level of excess and extremism permeating the country. The explosions that occurred in the heart of the capital, Riyadh, on 12 March 2003 put Saudi society face-to-face with itself for the first time. The media (which by then had expanded its scope) helped the public, when it realized



that the culprits were Saudis and not foreigners, to accept the opinions of those who honestly call things by their names.

The reform process that followed addressed various issues. In 2002, 15 students from a girls' middle school in Mecca met their death in a fire because of the prevalent views on women, and the restrictions imposed upon them by the religious authorities that controlled girls' schools, which allowed conservative tenets precedence over the sanctity of the soul and the right to life. After 42 years of girls' education having been in the hands of the religious authorities, this event led to a decision by the political leadership to merge girls' and boys' schools.

In 2003 came the first admission that there was indeed a women's issue that deserved to be examined and debated in the Third National Dialogue held by the King Abdul Aziz Center for National Dialogue in Medina. The conference was entitled 'The Rights of Women', but was forced under pressure from certain currents to add the words 'and Responsibilities' to the conference's title, because some people had not given up the contention that Saudi women had no cause, and that the claim to one was simply a figment of the liberated Western woman's imagination. However, although the Third National Dialogue was exceptional in the general context of things, it did manage to tackle unprecedented issues, such as violence against women, women in school curricula, women and labour, education, customs, legitimate rights, divorce, custody, alimony, the attitude of the courts towards women, and women and poverty.

Despite the courage it took to address them, these issues remain hostage to the social vicious circle in which society is entrapped. Such matters as women and labour, or whether women's work outside the home is allowed in Islam, are still being rehashed over and over again, even though the Saudi press had already debated them as long ago as the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s.

The Third National Dialogue conference was followed by a women's campaign to promote their participation in the municipal elections of 2004. This campaign was based on the promise that they would be allowed to take part, but, though the authorities admitted that women do have the right to vote and run as candidates, the promise was shelved, and women were told they needed preparation and could only run in the following elections. However, the next elections, due to take place in 2008 or 2009, were postponed.

Still, other developments followed in favour of what I have labelled the ‘Saudi women’s reform project’, which calls for granting women a firm right to equal citizenship with men, and full participation in the political, economic, social, educational and religious development of their society.

There are several varieties of Saudi feminism. Most are based on religious discourse, though with variations, such as the extremist religious discourse, the less extremist religious discourse, and the implied religious discourse. However, there exist also a modern feminist discourse, a non-Islamic or non-religious discourse, and one based on the internet.<sup>7</sup>

Many questions remain unanswered: what should we call Saudi women’s legal movements, creativity, academic excellence and cultural refinement? Is it Western feminism, Islamic feminism, Arab feminism, Saudi feminism or several kinds of feminism at the same time? How do Saudi women view themselves and their relationship with other women, the already initiated feminists?

Perhaps we should simply accept the title ‘Saudi feminisms’.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* King Saud University, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

1. Example given in detail by Thoraya Qabel to Sharifa Noor al-Hashemi in *Hoqool*, his booklet published in 2009, 5 (September 2007), p. 117.

2. The *sharifa* Nour al Hashemi, ‘*imr’a saudiah min jeel alumahat alawa’el, lamhat min hayati fi tajribat al’amal w’al bouh*’ (A Saudi woman of the early generations of mothers: scenes from my life in experiencing work and the telling of it), *Huqoul* 5, 2007, pp. 109–17; Ahmad al Wassel, ‘*Samira Khashoqji: samira bint aljazeera al’arabiya, 1939–1986*’ (Samira Khashoqji: samira, daughter of the Arabian peninsula, 1939–1986) *Huqoul* 5, 2007, pp. 90–1.

3. Interview conducted by Hatoon el-Fassi with Ms Badi’a Kashghari in *Riyadh*, 30 July 2009.

4. Mentioned by media consultant Hamed Abbas, *Okaz*, in his column of 18 December 2009.

5. Saddeka Arebi (2004), *Women & Words in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 260–2.

6. Saudi Women for Reform (2008), ‘The Shadow Report for CEDA’, available at [www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/womenreform40.pdf](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/cedaw/docs/ngos/womenreform40.pdf), accessed 16 October 2013.

7. Details of the different kinds can be found in the proceedings of the Mecca Cultural and Literary Club’s seminar: *Reading the Present and Looking Towards the Future*, March 2009.

## CHAPTER 11

# Arab Feminism – Obstacles and Possibilities: An Analytical Study of the Women's Movement in the Arab World\*

*Suad Zayed al-Oraimi\*\**

### **Introduction**

Though Arab feminism may indeed exist, it has not yet won social recognition. No intellectual change-seeking movement can rise and prosper without first going through a long struggle with those who wield influence in society, and on the decision-making process. It is also impossible for such a movement to form deep historical roots without a strong supportive and seasoned popular base. Feminist movements all over the world are born after much effort and a long struggle with the authorities and laws in effect; they are also the result of a bitter struggle by women who paid a heavy personal and social price, and the brainchild of women who suffered different forms of injustice. However, although these movements helped women from different cultures and backgrounds forge common cause and vision, and despite their contribution to international development, women the world over are still not part of the decision-making process, and their share of natural and economic resources is scarcely worth mentioning.

Based on the above, this chapter asks a number of questions on the situation of Arab women, and the conditions that would encourage the development of an Arab feminist movement, as well as a counter-movement. Is there a historical reference point for a feminist ideology? Were conditions in the Arab world ever amenable to the rise of Arab feminist thought? Is there an intellectual feminist philosophy alongside and

parallel to different liberation movements in the Arab world? These questions will be discussed from different angles, including the following: What is Arab feminism? Does it have its own particular traits? What vision does it espouse? Is there a comprehensive Arab feminist movement, or just a number of regional movements? And if an Arab feminist movement does indeed exist and if it has its own independent thought process, what kind of thought did it produce and what impact does it have today on Arab women? We will focus on the status of women in the Gulf region.

## **History and the problems for Arab feminist thought**

Arab women have a long worthy history and a considerable list of honourable achievements to their name that Arab historical records have not hesitated to highlight, and several names are mentioned in this context. Among them are Queen Zenobia in history, Balqis the Queen of Sheba in the Qur'an, Khawla bint al-Azwar in war epics, and Shajarat al-Dorr in folk stories and tales. Moreover, the modern history of the region, from the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf, is rife with accomplishments of Arab women. However, though such a record should have formed a natural foundation for the rise of a contemporary, Arab, intellectual feminist movement, frustrating circumstances never gave women the chance to strengthen and empower themselves. The Arab world went through several momentous historical junctures that caused society to ossify and erode from within, and women failed to prove themselves worthy partners in the development process. These failures were the result of a total regression by the Arab world as a whole, and the condition of women today is but a reflection of general social conditions.

At the end of the Abbasid period, the Arabs entered the age of decline and have not emerged from it to this day. They left their prosperous world after the fall of Granada and headed towards a series of failures leading to the fall of Baghdad in 2003. Throughout this time they also suffered a series of various forms of colonization. This resulted in a long period of pain and suffering that culminated in the division of the Arab region into small states, and in the establishment of the Zionist entity that obstructed its cohesiveness and development. As the internal situation in the region became more tense and complicated, different Arab resistance movements emerged in which women played an active role alongside men; however,

despite being active in the political and military wings, women never held sensitive leadership positions. What positions, then, did women hold in these national liberation movements, and how can their contributions be measured on both the national and regional levels?

## **Arab women and the liberation movements**

Arab revolutionary movements stoked by both men and women emerged after, during and even prior to the outbreak of the two world wars. Women formed an integral part of the very fabric of these movements. All over the Arab world, women fought alongside men, as they still do in Palestine, Lebanon and, more recently, in Iraq. Through their active role in these liberation movements, Arab women proved their own worth and, today, they are the constant factor behind the Palestinian revolution.

After liberation, both men and women turned to issues of development; education and infrastructure-building became the main concerns of Arab governments, well ahead of their people. Thanks to the spread of education and professional training, Arab women were able to play an active role in development, become active members of political parties and take part in spreading revolutionary ideologies. However, despite all of this, revolutions appreciated Arab women only in times of strife, since after the liberation wars, men took over the reins of power, and even comrades who had once fought side by side in the trenches now fought each other for power. Being wholly committed and active members of political movements did not help women attain power as leaders, legislators or policy makers, except in very rare cases, and then as conciliatory gestures. Even in this case, the aim was not to give women their due so much as it was an effort to attract the world's attention, and give international organizations a positive image of men.

The pressing question here is: Why did Arab women fail to strengthen their position through the establishment of women's movements in tandem with the rise of revolutionary ideologies in the Arab world? And why did no independent, intellectual feminist thought materialize alongside the Arab ideological current? Though the answers to these two questions are probably too long for this chapter to address, I will try to shed light on a number of obstacles that accompanied and followed liberation and, in turn, prevented the emergence of Arab feminist thought.

## *Decolonization*

The revolutionary movements' first objective was to see to the evacuation of the colonizers from the land, and to establish an independent political system; their hopes were pinned on a comprehensive drive of development. Arab unity was a major priority and a public demand, and all efforts were mobilized to make this dream a reality. In the midst of this ambitious drive, women's issues were left by the wayside because both Arab liberation and women's movements cast women as a sector that complements others in society, rather than a sector unto itself. Freedom and dignity were public demands by men and women alike.

## *Political conflict*

As the situation became more complex, Arab societies became embroiled in new and complicated political conflicts, beginning with the Palestine issue, which brought the entire Arab nation into a new phase of struggle. During that stage and its ensuing internal problems, its military and political failures, Arab individuals faced a number of new challenges, and were let down as much by foreign domination as by both cold and active wars with Israel. There was no opportunity then to redefine the social criteria and systems that identify women's place in society and govern their relationship with men. The recognition of the role of women was implicit, and references to them in Arab constitutions were vague. Women thus entered into a dark tunnel of endless expectation, and attempts to unravel the mysteries of various laws, with the hope that recognition would one day come.

## *Deficient feminist thought*

Feminist thought that emerged in the revolutionary period was not independent, but intertwined with the ideological and revolutionary discourse of liberation which, in turn, failed to delineate the clear lines of a specific strategy for dealing with women as equal partners to men. Similarly, women who had joined the struggle did not draw a clear distinction between themselves and men, since the trenches of battle were

both of theirs to share. After liberation, women failed to cement their independence from the family, tribe, party, political authority and society, or establish their feminine identity as independent entities. They did not weave a separate social fabric, nor did they build a deep awareness of themselves, a strong ego, as was the norm at that time when national consciousness dominated personal consciousness.

### *Religious movements*

The intellectual religious movements born under colonization focused on *jihad* and left no place for social relations. Today, some adherents to the *salafist* movement claim that there is no such thing in Islam as a gender-specific thought that focuses on men, women and their social and family relations. As far as they are concerned, the relationship between men and women is solely based on *sharia* (religious law). This intellectual current created shortcomings in the interpretation of socio-religious texts, and became a general culture. These religious forces thus helped consolidate a comprehensive view of the social status of women.

### *The failure to find inspiration in historical accounts*

Foreign imperialism shielded the Arabs from their past and prevented them from being inspired by their own cultural history; thought was so sidelined and isolated from its general context that it was totally ignored. The Arab individual thus lost contact with his roots, denied his past or tried to belittle it by qualifying it as 'backward'. Ignoring the past had a greater impact on women than on men; women were not able to draw inspiration from their history and, as a result, the image of the complete Arab woman who once founded kingdoms was absent from the view of modern women, who gave in to the changes in their social circumstances.

Having reviewed the historical obstacles, can we now say that a modern and independent Arab feminist movement does indeed exist?

## **Where is Arab feminism today?**

If we look at the condition of women in the Arab world today, we might not find a single group built on common interests and aspirations. The experience of Arab women is not mature enough yet to allow them to engage in a struggle to prove their presence, and this is due to a number of reasons that might not be under the control of women, but rather subject to powerful external circumstances.

First: change in the Arab world did not bring anything new for women, and the collapse of the traditional values and criteria of the patriarchal system left behind it chaos and lack of self-confidence. As the economic and political systems became more complex, the newly emerged patriarchal system, which the Arab intellectual Hisham Sharabi called 'neo-patriarchy', failed to produce new and unconventional thought because it lacked the capacity for invention and creativity. It came bearing the negative legacy of the past and failed to adapt to modernity because it was a hybrid and a distorted form of change. It hemmed in all the latent potential in Arab consciousness and ushered it into an era of forced absenteeism. The Arab discourse became abstract, instead of an intellectual philosophy rich with genuine potential.

Second: although the 'neo-patriarchal' system hemmed in women's creative abilities and broke their inner yearning for freedom, it made use of their productive potential in factories: it used them as support for men but not as their equals. However, because the new system gave Arab women a lower status than the one they had had before, they were unable to found an equal partnership with men at the decision-making level. Not only did this new system not recognize women, it denied them their existence in history; yet women never showed a clear desire to fight it.

Third: women's movements that appeared in the Arab world were 'state projects', as Mervat Hatem called them, rather than populist-feminist movements. Through this project, the authorities in power were able to execute a propagandist agenda in which women were integrated for show rather than out of a strong belief in their ability to participate effectively. Under such circumstances, Arab women were unable to establish themselves in an organized feminist movement with an independent presence and weight. The existing feminist organizations remain but a reflection of the political system in power, or mere slogans adopted by the state either for political gain or to raise its international profile.



Fourth: Arab women were not able really to gain their freedom given the prevailing social systems that view them as entities complementary to the family; nor are they allowed to work for their own account, because of the attitude that all projects of self-actualization should be aimed at shoring up the common good. Women have accepted and assumed this role, and considerably increased the weight of their responsibilities; in Arab culture, self-denial was, and remains, the virtuous woman's slogan. Women liked this description and worked for and according to it. Ironically, however, although Arab regimes succeeded in subjugating men, they also infused them with a sense of reverse despotism. Thanks to the hierarchical social system, men are the object of the state's despotism and women, in turn, are the object of men's.

We can therefore say that there is no such thing as an 'Arab feminism' with its own national culture; all we have are disparate voices calling for women's rights, though they do not address the relationship between men and women in any significant way. These voices remained confined to specific regions and have not spread throughout the Arab world, which is why Arab feminist thought was unable to formulate a clear, comprehensive and forward-looking view that has spread from the Atlantic to the Gulf. Even those regional feminist organizations that do exist failed to incorporate all sectors of women in a given country, appealing instead to specific groups in society. No effort was made to integrate rural and poorly educated women into women's groups, and Arab women failed to develop an absolute sense of self and identity, and develop an independent thought separate from the general Arab context.

## **The current potential for the development of Arab feminist thought**

First of all: Arab feminism today needs a popular *intifada* (uprising); no feminist thought can develop and prosper if it does not have a strong base of support. The catalyst for such a development in the Arab world has not matured enough yet, perhaps because the coercive arm of the state is stronger than any popular movement. The despotic nature of the regimes in power has prevented the seeds of real change from taking root and maturing. If we take Karl Marx's concept of 'struggle' as the basis for real social change and development, we will find that although class divisions in

the Arab world run deep, the popular revolt has not yet reached its peak. And although contradictions between the ruling authorities and the popular base have reached a complex level, they have not yet attained the level of an organized struggle, or ignited a radical popular uprising. Likewise, relations between men and women, and between women and the despotic powers, are still in the stage of a cold war. How can women, in light of the above, ignite the spark of change when they are outside the real arena of action?

Second: today, the Arab world is in the midst of a period of political and economic stagnation; the Arab individual is developing outside the arena of international action, and living in a state of dependency and subordination. There is no space here for independent Arab thought to grow. Political and economic subordination have prevented Arab intellectuals from rebuilding social systems and norms and finding alternatives outside the parameters of international hegemony. Arab feminism is no different from the general subordination and dependency that the entire Arab world is experiencing, and subordination of any kind can never foster the conditions necessary to build a liberation movement.

Third: intellectual isolation and retreat into the past are enough to thwart the development of any progressive and creative thought. The ossification of modern intellectual visions has led those Arab intellectuals who reject subordination to Western dictates to retreat and find shelter in their past, and thus fail to seek enlightenment from contemporary visions of modernity. In the absence of contemporary Arab thought, fundamentalist movements found ample room to spread their rejectionist and sometimes unyielding ideology. This rejection is not one of choice; it was dictated by the poor conditions of the Arab world, and came as a reaction to the foreign onslaught against it. As far as Arab citizens are concerned, rejection in itself, as an instinctive human behaviour and a social philosophy, is linked solely to what comes from the outside; thus, since modern Arab feminist thought is based on a foreign vision, it is rejected. Certain symbols associated with the movement are likewise rejected because they are linked to the West. Therefore, how can Arab women be socially accepted if they are believed to be promoting Western concepts?

Fourth: illiteracy, poverty and disease limit the ability of women to succeed. Most Arab women might not be aware of the importance of having an Arab feminist movement that organizes working women's efforts and

protects their religious, civil and legal rights. Poor women are busy ensuring their daily livelihoods; illiterate women do not fully comprehend feminist thought because they had no part in developing it; and sick women are looking for free medicine. Since Arab feminism was, and is, a bourgeois concept, how could simple women deal and interact with an ideology that has failed to build bridges with the popular base?

Fifth: there is no single Arab nation and therefore no single Arab feminism. The Arab world is divided into separate states with no political links whatsoever, except for the feeble League of Arab States, and these states are governed by disparate political systems. Based on that, any sense of unity is nothing but a notion embedded deep in the Arab psyche. Are Arab women from the Atlantic to the Gulf, therefore, capable of founding a single unified Arab feminist movement?

Sixth: there is no agreement, explicit or otherwise, among women even in individual Arab countries since, as is widely believed, women are the enemies of women. Because they have failed to develop feminist consciousness or create a sense of unity among themselves, women are often used to achieve gains that are harmful to women in general. This state of affairs is the result of a deeply rooted consciousness in women's memory that makes them see themselves as an inseparable part of their family, clan or tribe, and even their political party and religious sect. There is no such thing in Arab history as a 'women's party' with a political ideology based on a common feminine identity, as is the case elsewhere. The despotic patriarchal system has not given Arab women the chance to think independently. They constantly carry the problems of others and if they rebel, they fall into the quagmire of self-recrimination, not to mention social rejection.

Given the above circumstances, can an independent Arab feminist thought, with its own particular characteristics, ever see the light? Current indicators do not show any clear progress in women's achievements compared to men's, especially in the decision-making domain. Moreover, relations between men and women are still fragile; the image of women as homemakers dominates their image as potential partners in the public domain. This is not only due to the way men see women, but also to the way women see themselves: Arab women are still incapable of actualizing themselves except through men, and have failed to build their 'connected but separate selves'.

In conclusion, Arab women might not be capable of self-actualization, of achieving social and legal recognition and of openly declaring their rejection of the status quo. Their ability to activate their role will give them confidence in themselves as rebellious elements capable of effecting change. Any change in women's status is, however, subject to three conditions: having a clear objective, the desire and the ability to achieve it. Assuming that Arab women do succeed in delineating a clear objective and indeed have the desire to develop themselves and their feminist identity, and elevate these to the level of social recognition, will they be able to achieve all these conditions at once? Will society and men allow them to do that? It will require a great deal of sacrifice – are Arab women able to give enough when they are living on the margins of society?

We cannot deny, however, that there are early signs that Arab feminist movements are taking shape, and although these are not socially recognized, they do indeed exist. Moreover, since the Arab world is not homogenous as far as the conditions for change are concerned, the feminist movement reflects this lack of homogeneity; but still it should be effective even if its impact is limited to its immediate regional milieu. Despite its divergent paths and destinies, the Arab world is still a unit as far as the conditions for survival are concerned. I am not against a pluralistic Arab feminism provided it ensures its means of survival; many a feminist movement was thwarted because it failed to ensure the conditions necessary for its survival.

## **A Gulf feminism written in golden letters**

Now that we have reviewed the thorny conditions in the Arab world, we would not be exaggerating if we said that Arab feminism could become a reality thanks to the efforts of the Gulf region's citizens, because of the positive energy of this region. A 'Gulf feminism written in golden letters' could emerge from the Gulf. I would not be exaggerating if I said that, today, Gulf women are living their golden age, at least in terms of achieving their human rights, which ensure that their dignity remains intact. There is no discrimination in the provision of health and education services, and women are ahead of men in education, particularly in higher education, which is a rare phenomenon indeed.

Education is one of the mainstays of the empowerment of women; political, economic and social liberation can only be achieved through education, and education is highly valued in Islam. Despite that, illiteracy is more widespread among women than men, and the rate of illiteracy among Arab women is around 60 per cent.<sup>1</sup> We have the reverse ratio in the Gulf region, where the number of educated women, especially in higher education, surpasses that of men.<sup>2</sup>

Through education, women in the Gulf have been able to regain their productive capability thanks to the state and to international pressure. Political rights were somewhat late in arriving, however. Since the 1990s, women have been represented in the parliaments of Oman, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain, but only thanks to a quota, whereby their representation is ensured through a dual election and appointment system. This happened with the encouragement of the state, which imposed women on society, meaning that though women in the Gulf have won official recognition, popular recognition is still limited. This was the case in Kuwait. After a long struggle, Kuwaiti women were able to win social recognition: in 2009, they won four seats in direct elections to the current Kuwaiti National Assembly.

In UAE society, women are neither ignored nor underestimated; they are integrated in all walks of life and given a wide margin of freedom. The state has played a pivotal role in helping them develop their abilities and integrating them in the decision-making process, since development requires huge amounts of human potential at all levels. Moreover, the UAE is poor in human resources given that local citizens account for only 20 per cent of the population, half of whom are women. Naturally, the state is loath to impede or sideline this human potential when it so badly needs it; the integration of women in society at such a large scale has, therefore, its vital and national imperatives.

The state was not the only contributing factor to women's development in the UAE: the positive role that women themselves have played to bring about change has had a considerable impact on their integration in the development process. Given the positive role they played in the history of their country's productivity, UAE women were able to fulfil a variety of traditional and new roles. Thus they were able to safeguard their traditional values while embracing modernity, and thus built their image in line with the social traditions of their patriarchal heritage, without relinquishing any

modernity's requirements. Society therefore accepted their going out to work and learn.

If UAE and other Gulf women took full advantage of the freedom accorded them by society and the support afforded them by the state, they would be able to build something entirely new. Then, perhaps, out of the Gulf region new visions will emerge to lay the foundations of a comprehensive intellectual revival in which feminism is deeply rooted, and of which it is an inseparable part. The shiny golden letters of Gulf feminism could herald the beginning of a golden age for Arab women. Economic prosperity has allowed several generations in the Gulf to devote their attention to education away from the requirements of daily life. Likewise, the Gulf region's distance from the political problems that plague the rest of the Arab world has fostered a new generation whose mind is free of confusion and ideological partiality. This new beginning is a solid foundation for the emergence of an independent thought process and, as the poet Adonis has said, the new generation in the Gulf has developed outside the political ideologies that helped form the Arab individual consciousness. The Arab individual's close association with political and intellectual partisanship has shielded him/her from the truth. It may be true that we, in the Gulf, are outside this circle of ideological partisanship, but we are also living in the midst of a unipolar world, in an age of global hegemony and influence.

## **Conclusion**

Today, women in the Arab world are in a frenzied search for the right way to be rid of old habits and mindsets, and for new visions perceived through feminist eyes to appear. Women might not be able to do this on their own; the coincidence of several adverse social factors requires a major effort – massive masculine power, help from the official authorities and social blessing. Rebuilding Arab feminist thought requires public – male and female – solidarity. This collective effort should be a fruitful seedling planted on fertile soil instead of a parasitic seed growing out of a crevice in the wall. Arab feminism is not impossible: it is a dream that is difficult to achieve, at least for the time being.

Several factors are obstructing Arab women's progress and limiting their active participation in the public domain. Current conditions in the Arab

world are not better, but much worse than they were before. Arab women failed to seize the opportunity when change was possible and national liberation movements were on the rise; they totally forgot about their own needs and identified with the general context of family, society and political authority. Today, they suffer from ignorance, poverty, sickness and war, and are therefore hard at work securing their daily bread and medicine, ahead of education and feminist partisanship. And if there are any signs of a nascent Arab feminism, the Gulf would be the right place for it. The rights and education standards enjoyed by women in the Gulf could allow them to think positively and independently, without having to worry about the search for their daily bread.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* The United Arab Emirates University, al-Ain.

1. United Nations Report, 2001.

2. GCC Secretariat, 2008.

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## CHAPTER 12

# The Intellectual Frameworks and Theoretical Limits of Arab Feminist Thought\*

*Kaltham al-Ghanim\*\**

This chapter is a critical assessment of the intellectual and theoretical underpinnings of feminism in the Arab world across the different phases in its evolution. It notes what has been achieved in respect of some specific issues, but takes the view that overall the movement has failed to transform the views, consciousness and situation of most Arab women. Attempts to incorporate and/or redefine women's aspirations and roles in Islamic terms are seen as having taken over from earlier feminist voices. Where these voices do remain they are confined to a narrow intellectual elite and have failed to galvanize or inform women across the socio-economic spectrum. The chapter concludes that the contemporary feminist movement is repeating the same errors as in the past by adopting intellectual perspectives that do not suit the intellectual, ideological and value foundations of Arab culture. There is a need, therefore, to revise the intellectual foundations of the movement and make a rapprochement between this current and the reality of Arab societies.

### **Introduction**

Today, a century after it began, the call for the liberation of women has not really changed, either in content or in direction. In many respects, the condition of Arab women is still what it was a century ago, given the illiteracy rates, the nature of their relationship with men and the level of social rights attained. This does not mean that there has been no progress at all – there has indeed been some, but it has been confined to a number of

geographic and specifically urban areas. Women have fared better in some regions than in others in levels of education and participation in the labour market, although a general view would show that in terms of economic, social and political equality with men, their situation is still precarious.

A careful look at the condition of Arab women shows that they are still at the stage of delineating priorities and struggling to achieve a minimum of basic equality. This is why we should ask ourselves, as Sarah Campbell did in her diagnosis of feminist thought,<sup>1</sup> whether what is required is a change in attitude towards women or a change in the conditions under which they live, the very conditions that foster discrimination against them. In fact, this has to do not only with the condition of women, but also with that of the Arab people who failed to actualize the requirements of an Arab renaissance. The birth of the feminist movement and the delineation of its demands coincided with the rise of a general movement of social development that succeeded, among other things, in granting women their civil and political rights: Arab society, however, has not succeeded so far in transforming these nominal rights into facts on the ground. Thus, at a time when Arab women are facing deep, qualitative problems, we see them in turn surrendering to the status quo. This is clear from the current deterioration in their economic condition and decreasing levels of scientific and general knowledge, both of which are indicators of the poor conditions in which Arab societies languish.

## **Arab feminism and opportunities for change**

If the aim of the Arab feminist movement is to dismantle the structures that gave birth to the culture of discrimination, then the important question would be how to achieve this. Regardless whether it is ultimately achievable or not, it remains a far-fetched goal in light of the movement's failure to expand, on the one hand, and the failure of national development plans to effect change, on the other. After many years of planning and a host of expensive official programmes, conditions in the Arab world have not changed and the status of women has not improved to the level required, despite government boasting about the quantitative indicators showing higher literacy and education rates, decreasing fertility levels and improved quality of reproductive health, all of which pale in comparison with the negative indicators revealed by national and regional population surveys.

On the other hand, as far as women's rights are concerned, we find a regression in the popular mindset and the manner of interpreting these rights. In the Arab Gulf region, for example, we see a retreat from the way people thought following the wave of reforms in the 1970s; today there are calls for allowing multiple marriages as a solution for spinsterhood, even by women who belong to the cultural elite.<sup>2</sup> Recent studies on trends among young people of both sexes also show that, even among highly educated groups, they still defer to their parents in the choice and qualifications of a suitable spouse. A comparison between studies performed over the past 30 years reveals that the 1970s' generation was more eager than today's to liberate itself from parental control, which poses a problem as to the effectiveness of classic modernization methods in changing concepts and traditional cultural constructs.<sup>3</sup>

If the feminist movement is at the vanguard of the process to change the condition of Arab women, how is it that Gulf, rural, Bedouin and most other Arab women have not heard of it, or its slogans? What do concepts such as women's liberation, raising women's standards and the elimination of discrimination against women mean to the simple or recently urbanized woman, in different parts of the Arab world? Is the feminist movement's lack of success in reaching all women the outcome of an intellectual current that is limited to books and conferences, or due to the fact that its values are out of touch with the problems of Arab women and contradict the basic tenets of Arab society? If this is the case, then does it need to change its intellectual tenets in order to appeal to a wider cross-section of society, in particular women?

If we can explain this shortcoming as being part of a general Arab condition, will the feminist current be able to inject some enthusiasm into women in order for them to become one of the factors of change? Also, is feminism a genuine tool for change given the conditions in which women live?

## **The intellectual framework of Arab feminism**

At its foundation, feminism is a political movement with social objectives embodied in women's rights and the affirmation of their identity and role. In general, feminist thought is a compendium of theories, concepts, issues and analyses that describe and define the situation and experiences of

women, and how best to improve, enhance and make use of them. It is therefore a practical, implementation-driven movement with specific objectives, which, once it grew and became competent enough and able to develop theories, crystallized, ripened and became the strong link between thought and reality.<sup>4</sup>

Western feminism therefore tries to shake up the foundations of the feminine–masculine system, which it considers the source of gender discrimination acting, since time immemorial, to favour the interests of men. Psychology tells us, in the meantime, that despite such historic discrimination, human nature demands that the relationship between men and women be a complementary one. An analysis of the psychological make-up of both genders shows that their respective characteristics complement one another and compensate for the deficiencies in each. This means that the differences between them are natural, provided they benefit from each other's characteristics by assimilating them, and supplementing their respective deficiencies. This is of course a positive view that focuses on the connectedness, rather than on the disconnectedness, in the relationship. It places women on the right track not only by warding off the injustices against them and allowing them to share control over events with men, but also by benefiting from their special characteristics and role that bestow goodness and love on the world, even as they change reality.

Analyses of Arab feminist thought rest on the basic premise that Arab women suffer from inequality because of a social situation imposed by a patriarchal system that elevates the status and role of men, and relegates women to a lower status that confines them to the domestic and familial.<sup>5</sup> It also rests on the premise that women have the opportunity to overcome this unpleasant situation, now that machines have replaced force in the labour market, and physical strength is no longer a cause for discrimination between the sexes.<sup>6</sup>

Based on this view, the condition of women was analysed and linked to the degree of social development in each country. The more developed a society is – based on the Western understanding of development – the more progress one expects of it in the domain of women's rights and gender equality; the reverse is also true. In fact, raising the status of women cannot be separated from raising the standard of Arab societies, which have failed so far to fulfil their potential.

Using unrealistic and exaggerated language, feminist writing by female authors began appearing in Arabic literature and became a basic factor in the criticism of the situation of Arab women. Women were made to appear as the saviours of humanity from injustice, hatred and war, and the most active and rebellious element in society; this of course was a reaction to the powerlessness from which Arab women suffered.

Facing the humanist identity-seeking current that dominated women's literary discourse in Arab culture, there existed a more realistic, legal, political and development-oriented current that sought to amend and rectify the situation of women by granting them equal rights, and improving their quality of life through a fair and equal distribution of growth, care and support opportunities. In fact, women need both discourses, because one complements the other; the search for identity is a conduit to conscious activism, and activism is never wholesome in an environment that tries to abort, fight or resist it. To be realized, a vision needs the right tools.

In the past few decades, the emergence of new ideas offering Muslim women a model to emulate coincided with the onset of a new era in Islamic thought that began in the 1970s. This current embarked on a theoretical discussion of women's affairs from an Islamic perspective, in order to differentiate between that which is truly Islamic and that which is based on popular culture, between what is merely an aspect of the social structure and what is legitimate and Islamic. It is a movement that Amani Saleh describes as the reformist perspective of feminist knowledge, and the basis for feminist thought emanating from within the culture and history of Arab society, rather than from outside.<sup>7</sup>

Disagreements surfaced around the implementation of this thesis, ranging from the need to conform to Western-style modernity, to adopting the hard-line *salafist* ideology that had failed to present a model simultaneously religiously legitimate and objectively rational. The best-received model, from the point of view of participation, image and the status of women in Arab and Islamic societies, was the one that recognized the scientific achievements and social roles of women on a list of priorities, in which the women's role within the family takes precedence over all others. Mona Abou al-Fadl presented a well-balanced model with a good potential for practical implementation of the Muslim woman fully able to deal with modern issues, both local and international, while aware of the priority of her duties towards her family.<sup>8</sup> It is a model that has the potential to become

a generalized phenomenon, granting a distinct character to the participation and development of women.

### **Can we distance ourselves from the issue of discrimination so central to Arab feminist thought?**

The most central issue today at the official level in most societies is the integration of women in the process of development, from the joint perspectives of partnership and social responsibility as they are linked to human rights, globalization and sustainability. In this context the concept of gender has become the central issue in the effort to achieve equality between the sexes, and most societies used it cleverly to explain and analyse discrimination against women. To the feminist currents, the concept of gender signifies social progress as a result of globalization, as well as the need for new concepts that can help uncover shortcomings in societies, and diagnose their impact on women's lives.

Questions remain, however, regarding the ability of gender, and the indicators used to monitor the gap between men and women, to diagnose and evaluate the condition of Arab women. A good example is the use of paid employment as an indicator of the improving status of women, while unpaid work is an indicator of a lower status: this does not take into account a cultural system with entrenched values, such as the importance of the male provider, that have nothing to do with the status of women.<sup>9</sup> The concept of gender could be used as an analytical tool to monitor gaps between the sexes, but it ignores the importance of local details and women's ability in certain societies to overcome their circumstances, and find the right formula to mitigate the psychological, social and economic impact of gender discrimination, be it on the economic or the social level. Moreover, the participation of women could take different forms that do not necessarily conform, culturally or institutionally, to those in the West.

A fear of issues having to do with liberation and the theory inherent to the concept of gender is in fact one of the main reasons behind the emergence of currents that reject this theory's interpretation of the nature of the relationship between the sexes, and its impact on the social condition of women. It also limits the ability of government policies to mobilize various cultural groups behind the effort to change Arab mentality in favour of

more equality, to activate the role of women, and to empower them so that they may improve their own and their society's conditions.

In any case, we cannot deny that gender-based discrimination is still very present in Arab culture, and in the daily lives of women. Perhaps reducing a woman's existence to the issue of family honour is but a flagrant example of a culture that sidelines her as a human being, and entrenches her intellectual and physical dependence. These are very good reasons why combating discrimination against women is so necessary. In several newly urbanized regions of the Gulf, there are still several signs of discrimination between men and women in the family, in society and in the media, despite a general trend towards more balanced laws and policies. Hatoon al-Fassi gives real examples to demonstrate that women sometimes do not even have the right to their own bodies.<sup>10</sup> A father who uses the concept of *qawamah* (men's authority over women) to force his daughters – but not his sons – to undergo tests in order to donate a kidney to a brother suffering from renal failure is actually robbing women of the right to own their own bodies, and it shows that the father considers a woman's life less important and valuable than a man's.

Masculine values still poison Arab social cultures; they rob women of their ability to enjoy available opportunities for growth and restrict their intellectual potential, if not their ability to function at all. Because of Arab culture's condescending view of their abilities and potential, the achievements of women are not a cause for celebration as are those of men.

Moreover, the cause of women has not yet become a popular or cultural concern. For example, the media addresses the issue of equality in a humorous, superficial manner. It sometimes totally ignores, even reinforces, the negative stereotypical image of the withdrawn Arab woman, and casts her in the ideal mould of obedience and subservience, when it could as easily have portrayed the Arab woman who performs her role successfully under very difficult circumstances. Thus, the social tools of change of which everyone approves have failed to focus on, or at least point out, the areas of strength in Arab women. Because the symbols of women's weakness are stronger in the collective memory than the symbols of strength, cultural sources continue to reproduce the negative model of women as the main image in literature and art. This is not an image of a capable person, but of the favourite object of male desires and the reason

for his flaunting his weakness, not in the face of her spirit or power, but in the face of her body and coquetry.

Women, especially urban women, were thus made to believe that their strength lay in their weakness, and therefore assumed this persona and relied on it to gain trivial advantages. They totally ignored the other aspects of their personality, and the model of women able to turn the status quo to their advantage by adapting to it, and thus succeeding at least in forging a more psychologically balanced life, such as the more traditional women in Bedouin or agrarian communities. This was one of the revelations of Najla' Hamada's study that compared urban wives with those in Bedouin communities.<sup>11</sup>

Based on the above, it is clear that such circumstances are not amenable to the propagation of an ideology that puts women in a stronger position; we need first to explain the concept of power, its expressions and its different domains. Ideas such as these should be discussed, as a first step, in order for us to arrive at a feminist discourse more acceptable to women, and ultimately raise their awareness regarding their circumstances and the discrimination against them, before moving from theory to implementation. In any case, for the dream to become a reality, ordinary women must be brought into the feminist project.

## **Ordinary Arab women and the achievements of the feminist current**

Whether women were suppressed due to the prevailing cultural system or to a lack of social development, these circumstances actually limit their ability to discover themselves, crystallize their objectives, delineate their aspirations and decide how these could best be achieved. And if the feminist current and the educated elite in Arab societies have taken upon themselves to do what is necessary towards that end, is it then fair to ask what they have achieved so far?

If we look at the course of the feminist current, we will find a number of successes to its name, the most important of which are contributions made by educated women. They succeeded, for example, in changing mindsets on the early education of women in certain Arab societies. We also cannot ignore the role played by their call for change in altering the public's views on women's issues, including work outside the home and participation in



political life. Feminist literature has also helped introduce feminism to the literary and cultural scenes and, according to Ramadan Bastawisi, has played a major role in the cultural critique of Arab thought generally, especially in accepting the notion of cultural diversity and in rejecting the premise of a unipolar world.<sup>12</sup> Some believe that the advancement in the conditions of Arab women went even further in certain respects than the demands of women liberation leaders, which Raja Bahloul described as modest and limited compared with the overall objective they were seeking.<sup>13</sup>

On the legal front, feminists believe that including the principle of equality among citizens, regardless of their sex, in national constitutions is one of the most important results of their efforts in the second half of the twentieth century.<sup>14</sup> Calls for equality in citizenship rights between men and women coincided with the period during which newly independent Arab countries were dealing with their priorities, foremost among which was the writing of their constitutions; these were countries for which a constitution was a priority. Their main object, however, was the reform of the civil status laws in which the feminist current truly played a major role. Their efforts at the time were neither well organized nor alone in the field; other legal, media and religious groups played an important role in the reform process. We also cannot say that Arab women are experiencing an awakening; illiteracy rates among women, for example, are much higher than among men and in many countries illiteracy is increasing rather than decreasing, due to continuous economic crises and wars. In many societies, women failed to enter the labour and economic markets in sufficient numbers, and the rate of poor women is increasing even in the rich countries; women are the demographic group most affected by poverty and marginalization in the region.<sup>15</sup> Honour crimes still occur in rural areas, even among the well-educated, and certain habits harmful to women, such as female genital mutilation, are still widespread in several regions. The role of women in the public sphere is also diminishing, for despite the fact that most Arab countries have granted women their political rights, some as long ago as the 1950s (Lebanese women acquired their political rights in 1953, Egyptian women in 1956), political activism in these two societies has not led to the true and significant participation of women, and the number of women parliamentarians in them does not exceed a handful of

women in the best of circumstances. Moreover, and for many reasons, women's votes are not entirely independently cast.

## **Reasons for failure**

Although it is clear that Arab feminism can claim a number of successes, though only in certain historical junctures and among certain social and cultural groups, it is strange that we do not sense its impact even among the educated classes, which have not rallied, as they were expected to do, to the support of women's liberation. Large cross-sections of well-educated people and specialists such as doctors, architects and lawyers have not joined the current, whose main support has come from the ranks of writers and academics. Indeed, its voice has been greatly diminished, and its call to liberate women has been replaced by new calls that focus either on the developmental aspect of women's participation or on mobilizing religious forces, and upholding religious tenets and fundamentals.

Ibrahim al-Haidari blamed the failure of Arab feminism on its inability to face facts;<sup>16</sup> the progress achieved by Arab women through their revolt against the status quo, and calls to grant women their rights and integrate them in public life, were on the wane. Women who once raised the banner of liberation had to come once again to terms with the status quo, and retreat from their demands under pressure from despotic patriarchal systems.<sup>17</sup> In another theory, Khadija al-Uzaizi wrote that despite the development of Arab feminist discourse over the last three decades of the twentieth century, it did not rise to the level of a true feminist ideology, either in its intellectual depth or in its tackling of women's issues.<sup>18</sup> It is a discourse, al-Uzaizi claims, that, with few exceptions, lacks any philosophical dimension, most of it remaining subject to isolated personal interpretations that focus on the victimized, weak and abused woman. Some have, in the meantime, adopted Western feminism and its axioms as a model for solving Arab women's problems, without looking at the contextual framework in which orbit they revolve, or the limits of their interpretive potential outside their local cultural context. Both sides have failed to formulate a theory that expresses their respective visions for a better society, and encompasses the main values that any change in women's condition in the Arab world would require.<sup>19</sup>

In fact, the intermittent nature of Arab modernization, due to recurrent intellectual, economic and political crises, not to mention regional wars and conflicts, has prevented factors that allow for real change from taking root. It has also prevented an awakening that might provide the Arab people with intellectual and ideological theories they could readily adopt,<sup>20</sup> and that would create the motives necessary to mobilize both the resources and social forces required. The modernization that has already taken place in various Arab societies does not meet the bill, for it has resulted in no more than a formal amendment of laws and superficial embellishment of material life. It has never gone deep enough to touch people's lives, and has resulted in a number of incomplete projects of revitalization, including those that aimed at the resurgence of Arab women.

The real quandary facing Arab culture lies in the fact that it has failed to develop knowledge of and a cultural perspective on issues of social progress, and on what foundations these should be based. The Arab intellectual movements have been torn between contradictory currents and paths, none of which has succeeded in dominating cultural life in such a way as would have eventually led to an intellectual, scientific and social awakening. The condition of Arab women, and its continued fragility and backwardness, is but the reflection of a general Arab condition.

It is therefore important to ask ourselves about the role of Arab feminism in offering Arab women an alternative to their present reality. Has it contributed to raising Arab women's awareness of their rights and importance, not as appendages of men but as talented individuals? In other words, where are the aspirations of Arab women in relation to feminist theories? What do Arab women want, and what representation of themselves do they wish to see and approve? Do they see themselves as part of a whole, and entertain a particular vision of society that would allow them to share in its collective goals? Do they see society as based on a culture that supersedes individuality to distribute fixed gender roles, difficult to breach, even by men?

Society does not give women the chance to express their opinion on issues of liberation and women's rights even in the freest of atmospheres, such as those that govern in universities and academic conferences. This is also the fate of men who support women's rights. The cultural elite cannot but use tame words that shy away from exposing the patriarchal values that place women at a lower level than men, while daily life demonstrates

women's weakness and incapacity not in the face of male control or even in the awareness of its presence, but in its defence; it is women who fight against their own rights. This exposes the series of contradictions that plague Arab women's lives; they want to improve their conditions, but do not know that a large part of the problem lies in their ignorance of their own rights.<sup>21</sup>

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Qatar University, Doha, Qatar.

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2. For an analysis, see Baqer Salman al-Najjar (2000), *almar'a fi alkhaleej wa tahawulat alhadatha al'aseera* (Women in the Gulf, and the Arduous Transformations of Modernity) (Casablanca: Arab Cultural Centre).

3. Kaltham al-Ghanim (2010), *Youth Attitudes towards the Issues of Marriage* (Doha: Supreme Council for Family Affairs).

4. For the interview with Dr Noha Bayoumiat (in Arabic), see [www.annabaa.org](http://www.annabaa.org).

5. Mona Abou al-Fadl (2001), *nahwu tatwir manthour hadari ma'rifili dirassat almar'a* (Towards the Development of a Civilized Knowledge Perspective of Women's Studies), available at [www.amanjordan.org/aman\\_studies/wmview.php?ArtID=871](http://www.amanjordan.org/aman_studies/wmview.php?ArtID=871), accessed 29 July 2013.

6. For a review of the Islamic feminist current and its writings, see Fatima Hafeth (2002), '*nahwu ta'sis ma'rifa niswiya islamiyya*' (Towards the foundation of an Islamic feminist knowledge), *Women and Culture Bulletin*, previously available at [www.moslimonline.com/ShowNews.php?id=820](http://www.moslimonline.com/ShowNews.php?id=820), site no longer working.

7. Amani Saleh, 'Towards an Islamic perspective of feminist knowledge', *Periodical of Women & Civilization* 1(1).

8. UNDP (United Nations Development Program) (2001–9), *Arab Human Development Report, Indicators of Education and Economic Conditions* (Beirut: UNDP).

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10. Hatoon al-Fassi (2009), '*jasad almar'a mulk man?*' (To whom does a woman's body belong?), *al riyadh*, 6 September, available at [www.alriyadh.com/2009/09/06/article457515.html](http://www.alriyadh.com/2009/09/06/article457515.html), accessed 29 July 2013.

11. For a field study carried out in the Lebanese Beqaa Valley region, see Najla' Hamada (1997), *alqiyam w'al intima'al nafsi 'ind albadawiya wa ibnit almadina: tahlil muqarin* (Values and Psychological Affiliations of Bedouin and Urban Women: A Comparative Analysis) (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)).

12. Susan Ibrahim (2008), '*thulathiyat alnaqd li tafjir a'maq alnas! thuhour alniswiya wa alta'adud althaqafi*' (A triple criticism for the bombing of the depths of the text! The emergence of feminism and multiculturalism), daily *al-thawra*, 17 June, available at <http://thawra.alwehda.gov.sy>, accessed 29 July 2013.

13. Raja Bahloul (1998), *almar'a wa usus aldimocratiya fi alfikr alnassawi alliberali* (Women and the Bases of Democracy in Liberal Feminist Thought) (Ramallah: muwaten, Palestine Institute for the Study of Democracy).

14. Ibid.

15. Nuha al-Qaterji (2006), *almar'a fimanthoumit alumam almuttahida: ru'ya islamiyya* (Women in the United Nations System: An Islamic Perspective) (Beirut: almu'assat aljami'iyya l'il dirassat wa'l buhuth).
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17. Maryam Slim (2005), *Arab Human Development Report: Towards the Rise of Women in the Arab World* (Beirut: UNDP).
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19. al-Haidari, *alnitham alabawi walishkaliyyat aljins 'ind al'arab*, p. 365.
20. al-Uzaizi Khadija, '*alusus alfalsafiya l il fikr alniswi*'.
21. For an analysis of the obstacles to an awakening in the Arab world, see Azmi Bishara (2003), *turuhat 'an alnahda almu'aqa* (Theses on a Deferred Awakening) (Beirut: Riyadh al-Rayes).

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## CHAPTER 13

### Feminism's Difference Problem

*Joan W. Scott\**

Feminism is at once a product and a critique of modernity. Its Western European origins lie in Enlightenment emancipatory projects which, even as they proclaimed the equality of all mankind, established the distinctions between civilized and savage, rational and superstitious, historical and traditional that underpinned structures of class and race, and enabled imperial adventures and colonial domination.

As a movement for women's emancipation (whether specified as full access to education, employment, citizenship or law), feminism has had to contend with its double heritage: universality conceived in opposition to particularity; and sameness achieved by overcoming (abstracting, suppressing, or dismissing) difference.

The irony is that even as they challenged the false universal of 'Man', exposing it as a patriarchal ruse, feminists (in the West)<sup>1</sup> invoked the universal category of 'Woman' or 'women' to rally support for their cause. Although the cause was political, hence mutable and historically specific (education, the vote, abortion rights), 'women' was portrayed as a timeless and homogeneous category. Whether the commonality of 'women' was posited as biological (maternity; mothers of the race or nation; the social value of reproductive labour; the sex; the inborn traits of femininity: nurturing, caring, concern for the group or community) or as a shared experience of social, economic, political or psychological subordination (to – in one form or another – the Law of the Father), it was presumed to traverse differences even as it took them into account. But inclusion in the general category of 'Woman' or 'women' depended nevertheless on the exclusion of those who were too different to fit. Just as universal 'Man'

embodied the particularities of white, middle-class men, so universal 'Woman' was most often represented as white, middle class and heterosexual.

The great struggles of feminism – and not only in its most recent second wave (since the 1960s) – have had to do with challenges from those excluded by the universal claim. So, in the United States, the black slave Sojourner Truth asks a convention of white suffragists in 1848: 'And aren't I a woman?' And more than a century later, the Combahee River Collective denounces 'racism in the white women's movement'. So, the question of class divides nineteenth-century socialists and feminists as it does pro-abortion activists in the United States in the twentieth century (some of whom miss the class and racial implications of the Hyde Amendment as they focus on the 'larger issue' of abortion rights).<sup>2</sup> So lesbians protest the heterosexual presumptions of what counts as feminism, indirectly in the nineteenth century, powerfully at the end of the twentieth. So, at successive UN conferences (from Mexico City to Beijing), the fictional unity of 'women' is given the lie by the factionalism of geopolitics: North vs. South; West vs. East; Israel vs. Palestine. And so, after the fall of communism, Eastern European feminists charge their Western counterparts with condescension and misrepresentation. As Elizabeth Spelman put it: 'The paradox at the heart of feminism is how to weigh the things women have in common with the differences among us.'<sup>3</sup> Or, as Olympe de Gouges commented wryly two centuries earlier, feminists 'have only paradoxes to offer and no problems easy to resolve'.<sup>4</sup>

The last decade of the twentieth century saw an outpouring of attempts to address the paradox: invocations of the mantra of race, class, gender and sexuality; reminders of the need to historicize not only various feminisms, but the very category of 'women' (and so its contingent meanings, its political uses);<sup>5</sup> the continued search for commonality (Robin Morgan's *Sisterhood is Global* has an appendix that lists the word for 'sister' in every country in the world);<sup>6</sup> the pluralizing of women, the insistence on their differences; theories of intersectionality, multiple identity, subject formation, standpoint epistemology; turning away from foundationalism and metaphysics to structural linguistics and psychoanalysis. The richness of the efforts is a measure not of the limits of our thinking but of the intractability of the paradox.

If the relentless puzzle of sameness and difference, the universal and the particular, is one aspect of the conceptualization of modernity, so is the opposition between the secular and the religious, which has lately become a more central and explosive ingredient in feminist conversations. If first-wave feminism had its religiously inspired activists (English Quakers in the eighteenth century, Protestant anti-slavery activists in England and the USA in the nineteenth), second-wave feminism has been decidedly secular. Religion is dismissed as an instrument of patriarchy that provides the ideological justification for women's subordination as God's will. The association of religion with tradition, superstition, dogma, orthodoxy – all that is against reason, democracy and history – is one of the heritages of the Enlightenment that most feminists have not deconstructed. Indeed, the antagonism between religion and second-wave feminism is so deeply ingrained as to have virtually eliminated it as a serious topic for theoretical consideration. This is not to say that there aren't feminists in the Christian, Jewish and Muslim traditions who take as their mission the formulation of less sexist theological interpretations of biblical texts, or that there aren't feminist scholars in religious studies who have addressed the question. There are, of course, long-standing efforts of this kind. But it is to say that the opposition between modernity and religion hasn't received the same far-reaching feminist critical scrutiny that has been given to other features of modernity such as universalism.

The reasons for this are part of modernity's history. They surely have to do with the way, in the process of secularization, women and religion were both placed on the negative side of the opposition between past and future. Women were depicted by philosophy, political theory, medicine and literature as passionate, credulous, incapable of rational thought (bodies not minds), superstitious, pawns of the clergy, representatives of the private, immune to secular temporalities and outside of history. Organized religion, for its part, gave substance to its reputation as an enemy of progress, insisting that its tenets were immutable (even as they changed) and that norms of gender hierarchy were divinely sanctioned. Thus it makes some sense that, in Australian feminist Bronwyn Winter's words, 'organized religion in general and monotheistic religions in particular are not compatible with a feminist project'.<sup>7</sup> If feminists were to claim equality, they had first to repudiate the association of women with religion before even disputing the religious justifications for their subordination. In so



doing they would place themselves on the modern side of the opposition between future and past, change and tradition, reason and superstition, the secular and the sacred. Religion as such was to be refuted and repudiated; it was not a subject for a more probing critical inquiry.

In the last few decades, the emergence of Islam as a geopolitical phenomenon has caused confusion and anxiety for feminists. In the ‘clash of civilizations’ controversy, feminists have found their intuitive antipathy to religion an inadequate guide for action. If religion were the enemy, the locus of women’s subordination, did the distinctions between benign practitioners of the faith and fundamentalist terrorists really matter? What position should be taken in the face of the Bush administration’s argument that the war in Afghanistan was undertaken to liberate women from the strictures of an absolutist religion? When, in a move that could not be detached from its racist motivations, the French government banned the *hijab* in public schools, should feminists approve the action as emancipatory?<sup>8</sup> That so many did is a sign not, I think, of clear republican thinking, but of the trap created for feminists by the religion vs. modernity opposition. (In this discourse, those who reject religion are said to be acting as agents; those who accept it are, by definition, being subjected against their will.) That is the reason, too, for the recent groundswell of feminist support in France for the banning of *burqas* in public space. How has the coercive state become, in the thinking of these feminists, the guarantor of women’s liberation? Why has it been so difficult to accept the idea that religious belief might motivate women’s individual choices in ways unfamiliar to Western feminists; to understand that the construction of a self might involve the *choice* of submission to a communal order or to the will of a God? Why has it been almost impossible to think about agency in other than secular terms?

To be sure, there is no unanimity among feminists on these issues, and there is also, not surprisingly, no clear line of thinking on the matter. Winter bemoans the marginalization, in France, of ‘secular anti-racist feminists caught in the middle, or pushed out of the debates’, which she says were hijacked by other agendas. But she can offer no solution to the dilemma she describes; indeed, she concludes that there seems to be no simple alternative ‘that refuses collusion with either church or state in their manipulation of women’s “agency” or “rights”’.<sup>9</sup> Finding one, I suggest, is a question not only of strategy, but of theory. It involves thinking with, but

not within, the terms that structure the debate, not resolving the impasse they seem to create, but analysing its operations and effects. In this way we productively loosen the grip of closed binary thinking; the categories become the object of critique, not the defining terms of our conversations.

The deconstruction of the secular/religious opposition involves, as Talal Asad argues, a genealogy of the secular, an examination of its articulation in the discourse of modernity.<sup>10</sup> It is not surprising that those who have begun this work find that 'religion' was the key oppositional element. The sociologist of religion, Tomoko Masuzawa, writes:

the modern discourse on religion and religions was from the very beginning – that is to say, inherently, if also ironically – a discourse of secularization; at the same time, it was clearly a discourse of othering. My suspicion... is that some deep symmetry and affinity obtain between these two wings of the religion discourse; that they conjointly enable this discourse to do the vital work of churning the stuff of Europe's ever-expanding epistemic domain, and of forging from that ferment an enormous apparition: the essential identity of the West.<sup>11</sup>

As 'self-consciously modern Europeans' assumed that religion was an aspect of a fast disappearing past, new fields of study expressed and elaborated this belief. Two new sciences pertaining to non-European worlds, anthropology and Orientalism, promoted and bolstered the presumption that this thing called 'religion' still held sway over all those who were unlike them: non-Europeans, Europeans of the pre-modern past and, among their own contemporary neighbours, the uncivilized and uneducated bucolic populace as well as the superstitious urban poor, all of whom were something of 'savages within'.<sup>12</sup> It is certainly the case that many European feminists shared this view of tradition-bound 'others' at home and abroad.

Masuzawa describes a process in the course of the nineteenth century that involved the 'hellenization and aryanization' of Christianity in parallel with the 'arabization' of Islam (even though most Muslims were not then, as not now, Arabs):<sup>13</sup> 'The rule of Islam was now condescendingly viewed as narrow, rigid and stunted, and its essential attributes were said to be defined by the national, racial and ethnic character of the Arabs, the most bellicose and adversarial of the Semites.'<sup>14</sup> The 'civilizing missions' undertaken by European imperial powers were aimed at domesticating, if not eradicating, these peoples.

The invocation of secularism today, in (Western) feminist condemnations of 'Islam' (sometimes carefully distinguishing its political from its

pietistic forms, sometimes conflating it with terrorism and/or the worst forms of patriarchal oppression), carries with it these traces of its nineteenth-century articulations. This, despite adaptations and reformulations in different historical and geopolitical contexts, among them eloquent attempts by Muslim feminists such as Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas to insist that fundamentalists do not speak for all of Islam and that all Muslims (an ethnic category that refers to ‘people, countries, states, laws, and customs’), is not Islamic (religious).<sup>15</sup> Careful definitions are not enough to challenge these deeply rooted ideological formations, especially when they reinvolve the secular/religious opposition. The question is: What will it take to mount such a challenge?

It is not a repudiation of secularism that’s wanted, but critical thinking about it, especially as it has shaped a certain feminist outlook. A simple inversion of the secular/religious opposition is not useful; the point is not to embrace the ‘other’s’ religion as a way of dissociating ourselves from Western colonial racism. We don’t want to idealize either category, but to historicize them in relation to one another; to ask what kind of work the categories have done and are doing, and how the situation of women and the thinking of feminists have been implicated in this history. When French politicians ban headscarves or *burqas* in the name of women’s equality, we should ask what they mean by equality, how their rhetoric contributes to the fortification of that nineteenth-century notion of modern European identity (with its own normative conceptions of women’s place) in the face of huge historical transformations now going on? How does an uncritical endorsement of *that* idea of equality associate feminists with defensive national projects they might otherwise be sceptical of? How does the denunciation of religion (the particular religion of Islam) as the source of oppression veil not only secular oppressions, but the many varieties of religious experience? Can we think about a feminist critique of the secular that would be similar to the feminist critique of the universal – one that would ask not how to define it, but how it operates? One that would contest its exclusions even as it aspired to some of its principles? One that would acknowledge that religion’s history is inextricable from the history of modernity; that it is one of the excluded differences we now must address? How would feminist discourse be changed by that theorization? Is the ‘difference problem’ raised by treating religion as a *modern* phenomenon (and not as modernity’s antithesis) any less serious than the challenges

posed by those once-excluded others: women of colour, third-world women and lesbians? How and in what ways?

The 'difference problem' has several resonances. It refers at once to the way in which differentiation secures the meaning of a term (the universal is not the particular, men are not women, 'women' traverses differences of female ethnicity, race, sexuality, nationality and religion) *and* troubles some all-inclusive, universalist promise (the rights of Man, of humanity, of all women). It refers as well to our need to problematize the operations of difference, not to accept them as natural or historical givens, but as contingent forms of the very way we think regarding the social and political organization of things. The difference problem that demands our attention these days is the one that puts religion(s) on the nether side of modernity and that elevates the secular to a set of principles detached from the history that has brought them into being.

These, then, are the issues I think we face now. In the long history of feminism, difference has played a dynamic role in constituting feminist movements, both because it consolidated groups of women around specific political issues and because it exposed the exclusionary limits of how membership in those groups was defined. It has also been an unending problem, defying simple pluralizing solutions. In the past few years, religion – as identity, right of conscience, choice, subjection and subjectivity – has become a critical issue. It has engendered the same passion and engagement that characterized the debates of the closing decades of the twentieth century. In so doing, it has opened political and theoretical challenges that awaken anxiety and expectation: anxiety because the seemingly solid rock of the secular has developed cracks and fissures; expectation because grappling with a new problem (or the new forms an old problem has taken) is inherently exciting. The reassuring thing in this moment of high tension is that, historically, feminists have been extremely adept at addressing the problem of difference; not by solving it, but by working with it, by making it a critical tool of the theory we practise.

## Notes

\* Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, NJ.

1. Whenever I refer to feminism in this chapter, the qualifiers Western and Euro-American should be assumed.

2. In 1976, the US House of Representatives, at the initiative of Congressman Henry Hyde, passed legislation banning the use of federal funds to pay for abortions.
3. Elizabeth Spelman (1988), *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon Press), cited in Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (eds) (2003), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge), p. 21.
4. Olympe de Gouges (1789), *Le Bonheur Primitif de l'homme, ou les Rêveries patriotiques* (Paris), p. 23.
5. Denise Riley (1988), 'Am I That Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (London: Macmillan).
6. Robin Morgan (1996), *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology* (New York: Feminist Press, The City University of New York).
7. Bronwyn Winter (2008), *Hijab and the Republic: Uncovering the French Headscarf Debate* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), p. 314.
8. Joan Wallach Scott (2007), *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
9. Winter, *Hijab and the Republic*, p. 342.
10. Talal Asad (2003), *Formation of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press).
11. Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 20.
12. Ibid., p. 19.
13. Ibid., p. xiii.
14. Ibid., p. 179.
15. Marie-Aimée Hélie-Lucas (2003), 'The preferential symbol for Islamic identity: women in Muslim personal laws', in Carole R. McCann and Seung-Kyung Kim (eds), *Feminist Theory Reader: Local and Global Perspectives* (New York: Routledge), p. 188.

## CHAPTER 14

### Feminism as Critique

*Nivedita Menon\**

As a feminist located within politics in India and like all feminists, also simultaneously and unavoidably relating my feminism to other forms of injustice in society, following discussions over Arab women's experience has been exhilarating. Issues that seem at one level familiar are articulated in unfamiliar ways, while concerns specific to this region nevertheless resonate for me as echoing predicaments faced by feminists at some place or in some time.

The most striking feature in this region that overshadows all possibilities of politics, and that sets the horizon within which *any* politics can be carried out, is, of course, war, occupation and the replacement of Communism with Islam as the enemy in the geopolitical power map. This results in the quandary or double bind that Jean Makdisi refers to in her work – criticism of any internal injustice, especially towards women, makes feminists seem complicit with the worldwide attack on Islam, but the refusal to criticize makes feminists complicit with patriarchy and misogyny.

This quandary is one familiar to feminists in colonial situations in different historical periods, for one of the most familiar tools used by imperialism has been that of the civilizing mission of rescuing women from the brutalities of their own culture. Feminists in various situations of conflict, as well as in situations of relative peace, have heard the familiar phrase – 'This is not the time' – and heard it from their comrades and fellow travellers in struggle. But somehow we have to evolve those political strategies that will simultaneously address patriarchy whatever our other politics. The struggles, as Amal Amireh writes, will always have to be simultaneous: there is no other way.

I will focus on two issues for feminist politics in India: one of which has come up in discussions on Arab feminism quite centrally; and another that has been mentioned only peripherally. Through these two issues I hope to raise questions more generally applicable to feminist politics in the global South.

The first is the general acceptability of the term ‘gender’ in the corridors of state power in India from about the 1990s. The term ‘empowerment of women’ underpins government policies on a range of developmental issues, and what it essentially means is that ‘women’, located as they are in patriarchal society, with the sexual division of labour firmly in place, are to become agents of government’s neoliberal and ecologically unsustainable development policy. What is happening here is that the feminist term *gender*, meant to destabilize the given-ness of biological sexual identities, has been domesticated by the governmental practices of the Indian state to simply mean women – that is, women with the specific skills they have developed in their roles as wives and mothers. These skills are to be deployed in the interests of fulfilling governmental agendas. For instance, a feminist study of this phenomenon in the state of Kerala showed how women elected to local government bodies were, in the discourse of the political parties of the state, meant to bring their skills learned in the family – thrift, conflict resolution and service of others – into their work as elected representatives.<sup>1</sup> Politics thus becomes recast in the language of the family, and development discourse domesticates and tames feminist politics.

Feminists who interact with state institutions have often pointed out that the term ‘women’s empowerment’ is often and easily used, while the term ‘feminism’ is unacceptable. This phenomenon of the state’s appropriation of a terminology produced by a vibrant women’s movement with a long history, which I would not call ‘state feminism’ in the Indian context, for as we have seen, it is the very opposite of feminism, goes along with another phenomenon familiar in the region and in Latin America, the NGO-ization of the Arab Women’s Movements. (Here let me briefly say that we must distinguish between ‘colonial feminism’, state appropriation of feminist terminologies and the NGO-ization of the Arab Women’s Movements, which I think are three distinct phenomena.)

About NGO-ization of the Arab Women’s Movements, I would say that while the dangers are evident – most significant of these being donor-driven agendas, and I largely agree with depoliticizing the impact of this process –

we should not underestimate the possibilities of radicalization inherent in these situations as well, both within government programmes and NGOs. I don't mean here simply that 'funded programmes can also do some good',<sup>2</sup> rather that their intentions are, in fact, often subverted.

Power can never be all-encompassing and all-controlling, something always exceeds, escapes, its grasp.

This is why I believe that Deniz Kandiyoti's self-described 'Cassandra-like' prognostications, while offering a timely warning, apply a closure unwarranted by the histories of power and resistance historically. It is this excess that exceeds power's grasp that brings me to the second issue I wish to discuss.

It is impossible to discuss feminist politics in India without understanding caste and religious community identity, class, neoliberal policies and the challenge to secularism from the Hindu right. However, keeping these issues in the background, I will discuss briefly a significant achievement of sexuality movements in India – that is, a recent judgement of the Delhi High Court that decriminalized sex between consenting adults of the same sex.

By sexuality movements I mean a loose coalition of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered) groups, *hijras* (traditional transgender communities), sex-workers and feminist and democratic rights groups that have come together since the 1990s. Some of the petitioners were NGOs, and it was the discourse about AIDS prevention that enabled a public addressing of the issues of sexuality. But the sexuality movements went far beyond the expectations of disease prevention, and raised fundamental questions about sexual identity itself. With this judgement, a law introduced by the British colonial government in the nineteenth century, which criminalized non-heterosexual sex for the first time in India, has come to the point of being repealed. Why is this relevant for feminism? At the most basic level it is a matter of citizenship rights of large numbers of Indians who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgendered. But, more importantly, the sexuality movements are raising questions about the assumed naturalness of the heterosexual patriarchal family, which is the source and site of oppression of both women as well as of men who do not conform to patriarchal standards of power and personhood.

The heterosexual patriarchal family is the basis of inequitable property relations in society; inequitable not only between men and women, but in



the sense of depriving the vast majority of society from access to resources that are privatized inside the family. This family is also the basis of repressive caste and community identity. Any challenge to such family arrangements and the possibility of rethinking new forms of intimacy and support should be welcomed by feminists.

A quick example here illustrates the potential of undisciplined 'love'. In India, Valentine's Day has come to be very popular since the 1990s.

Advertising around the date is saturated with commodified romance, restaurants are overbooked and so on. As feminists, when the phenomenon began to manifest itself in the liberalizing 1990s, we read it critically as exemplifying the new consumerism (it is not enough to 'love' someone on Valentine's Day, you have to buy something to prove it). But very soon, the Hindu Right began to attack it as dangerous to 'Indian values', and this includes physical attacks on courting couples in public. This attack on Valentine's Day coincides with increasing instances of families violently separating couples who choose to marry outside their caste or religious community, often killing one or both of them, and increasing instances of 'lesbian suicides' – women who commit suicide, leaving letters saying that they love a woman, whom they are prevented from living with and cannot live without.

The recognition then began to emerge among feminists of the thing that conservative forces in India see as dangerous in Valentine's Day: the subversive potential of love. Love that refuses to be tamed within the rules of caste and community and of heterosexuality.

The acceptance of love, desire and non-heterosexual sexuality, of sex-work as work, of gay men and transgender people claiming feminism, all have the potential to destabilize 'woman', the subject of feminist politics. The Indian women's movement has come a long way from its homophobia of the 1980s to a point where there is a minimum consensus on the democratic rights of LGBT people. This journey is marked by incessant debates, dialogue, bitter argument and many broken friendships. But here we are.

This is why I want to celebrate feminism as critique. How can critique produce solidarities? I would say relentless critique – not only of the socio-political economic structures within which we find ourselves, but of our own politics and of our notions of what constitutes us as 'us' – is the very basis of solidarities. It is only through such critique that feminisms have

come to recognize race, class, imperialism, caste and sexual identities as destabilizing the category of ‘women’, a recognition which at the same time, paradoxically, has helped to build solidarities across these identities.

Anywhere in the world, if I walk into a room of women all being vocally critical of themselves – these are the mistakes we made, we thought this way in the 1970s, but by the 1990s we realized that we were wrong, we have come to the end of all that we thought was good about our politics and so on and on – I know immediately that it’s a bunch of feminists.

So – I salute feminism, critique and solidarities!

## Note

\* University of Delhi, New Delhi, India.

1. J. Devika and V Thampi Binitha (2007), ‘Between “Empowerment” and “Liberation”: The Kudumbashree Initiative in Kerala’, *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* January, 14, pp. 33–60.

2. Ibid.

## PART TWO

# The Crisis of Feminism in the Context of War, Civil Conflict and Military Intervention

## CHAPTER 15

# Feminism Between Secularism and Islamism: The Case of Palestine (The West Bank and Gaza Strip)\*

*Islah Jad\*\**

### **Preface**

The 2006 legislative elections in the West Bank and Gaza brought in new leaders from the Islamic Movement ( Hamas), who not only won the majority of seats in the Palestinian Legislative Council, but also formed the first government with a majority from the Movement.

The elections also brought in the first woman minister from Hamas to take charge of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, and between March 2006 and June 2007 two women ministers, both from Hamas, were named at the head of the Ministry. Both women, however, found it difficult to run a ministry where the majority of the employees were not members of Hamas, but came from a wide variety of political currents, mainly Fateh, which controls most of the institution of the Palestine National Authority (PNA). The demise of the Hamas government in the West Bank put an end to a conflict between Hamas women and a number of women from Fateh, a conflict that sometimes degenerated into violence. What lay behind the conflict was basically a difference of outlook between the secular feminists and the Islamist women on various women's issues. This schism among the Palestinians took a dangerous turn, especially because it was used to justify the bloodletting, liquidations and political and geographic divisions between the occupied West Bank and the Gaza Strip.

This conflict raises a number of questions: should the Islamist movements be punished for reaching power, or should there be a review of the causes that led to the failure of their political rivals? Could feminism act

as an inclusive framework for women regardless of their political and intellectual affiliations? Could one talk about a common feminist framework that women could rely on to achieve their shared and agreed-upon objectives? Does patriarchy exist solely in Islamist ideologies and not in the national and nationalist currents? What do we mean by feminism? Is there a single feminism, or several feminisms? What do we mean by Islam: the movements named after it? The religion itself? The doctrine? Or the *sharia* (Islamic law)?

## **The political conflict between the feminist movements and Islamist women**

Ziba Mir-Hosseini draws attention to the importance of separating religion, as a faith and a set of values, from organized religion (with its institutions, laws and practices). After independence, secular systems borrowed certain aspects of the traditional doctrine and encoded them into law, mixing various doctrinal opinions with the ‘sacred’;<sup>1</sup> new Islamist political movements then added more sanctity to the already sacred. This prompted women from a number of modern movements to differentiate between the sacred and the temporal (various religious doctrines and denominations) in order to bring religion closer to its institutions, laws and practices, which led to the emergence of what we know today as ‘Islamic feminism’. What I mean by feminism is the general sense that indicates an awareness of the structural causes (political, economic, social and cultural) that lie behind the discrimination against women, because they are women, and the efforts to change them.

This study assumes that the conflict in Palestine between those who call themselves secular feminists on the one hand, and Islamist women on the other, is in fact a cover for an ongoing political struggle over power and control, and not necessarily a conflict over feminist principles, whether secular or Islamist. Moreover, the insistence on the secular identity by some is a new phenomenon that developed in the context of the confrontation with the Other, and is not necessarily based on any specific ideological or behavioural pattern.

## **The ambiguities of Palestinian secularism**

Since its inception, Arab nationalism has used Islam as the basis of its legitimacy. However, neither *nationalism* nor *Islam* are static terms. The rivalry between the Islamist Movement and the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) is, to a large extent, an outcome of the secular national movement's failure to fulfil its promise to achieve national independence or build the nation. One of the factors that facilitated the cohesion between Islam and Palestinian nationalism was the defeat of the national movement in Palestine, and Hamas' success in identifying itself with the struggle for Palestinian national rights.

Researcher Musa Budeiri believes that Fateh uses religious symbolism and ideology to garner support, and doubts what is said about its secular credentials and those of the Palestinian national movement.<sup>2</sup> He also firmly believes that Islam has always been, and still is, one of the main features of Palestinian identity, especially in the occupied territories, and that the Islamist movement in Palestine has identified with and absorbed the national discourse, ever since the British Mandate era, in a manner that makes it difficult to draw a clear line today between the Islamists and their nationalist rivals. Therefore, this cohesion between Islam and nationalism is a degradation of the 'real' meaning of secularism, which ought to be separate from religion. Budeiri also views Islam and religion from the perspective of continuity rather than interruption, meaning that there has been an uninterrupted Islamist movement from the Mandate period until today.

Barbara Stowasser believes, on the other hand, that portraying Islam as a political movement that continuously renews itself, or is usually immutable, could be understood as the 'resurgence' of an Islam intent on pursuing the struggle with nationalism, as a matter of ideological principle.<sup>3</sup>

Jamil Hilal, parting from Budeiri's opinion, does not agree that Islam was a factor in the construction of the Palestinian national identity, whether in the Mandate period or during the modern reconstruction of Palestinian identity in the 1960s. He defines secularism as the clear separation between political and religious institutions, and says: 'We find that in the national political domain, institutions, identities and ideologies have their own models, dynamics and specificities, entirely different from those in the religious domain.'<sup>4</sup> He believes that the confrontation with Zionism and British rule has given the Palestinian identity a secular or national dimension, in the form of a national individuality that transcends religion,

the sect and the region. At no time did Palestinian nationalism employ religious discourses or myths to maintain control, which does not alter the fact that most Palestinians were, and still are, religious people in the traditional sense of the term.<sup>5</sup> While I agree with Hilal that the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) does not use Islam as a major political reference,<sup>6</sup> its practical policies have conformed to Islamic religious tenets. For example, the PLO decided to subject issues like marriage, divorce and inheritance to the general popular understanding of Islam, and gender relations in Palestinian society, which fall under its jurisdiction, to the *sharia* law rather than to secular civic codes. Gender relations were the ‘unseen dimension’ and there was a failure to envision any continuity between Islamic and secular ideologies on matters relating to family and gender. This confirms Kandiyoti’s view that the ambiguous aspects of modernity are most evident when women’s political participation is at stake.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, Hilal, who draws a clear distinction between religion and nationalism, does not give any reason why a mainly secular movement would use religious terminology to bestow legitimacy on itself, in the context of its rivalry with a religious movement like Hamas.

For their part, those who insist that the Palestinian national identity is essentially secular in character refuse to see the extent to which this nationalism and its identity are infiltrated by the factors of class, gender and religion. Kandiyoti shows, for example, how ‘despite being influenced by the age of enlightenment, many secular nationalisms unconsciously adopted the premise that change in women’s condition could be overlooked only to safeguard the national interest’. She adds: ‘The ideal woman was portrayed as a fertile, humble and authentic peasant, and the modern woman as a disciplined body devoid of desire, i.e. “the sister of men”.’<sup>8</sup> These two parallel models continue to coexist in the day-to-day practices of Fateh, the PLO and the PNA.

This could easily explain why the secular PLO, composed of both men and women, is sympathetic to the Islamic Movement, even loyal to it at times. The over-politicization of both the gender and religious identities could raise questions regarding the ‘progressive’ nature of Palestinian nationalism and its secularism.

## **Gender, Islam and the Islamists: feminism and the conflict between concepts**

Islam and the Islamists are the subjects of interest to many feminist researchers, and debates around gender relations in Muslim societies reflect their interest in culture and ideology.<sup>9</sup> Several feminist researchers criticize the way gender, religion and Islam are dealt with as immutable and extraordinary issues that exist outside history.<sup>10</sup>

In an attempt to categorize various approaches on gender in Islam, Mir-Hosseini<sup>11</sup> proposes three different categories: the first relies on different interpretations or the reinterpretation of sacred texts quoted as sources of power and legitimacy by certain ideologies, and attitudes vis-à-vis women's rights, gender roles and relationships; the second relies on local and national ideologies and their local historical characteristics, those that produce their own discourse on women and gender roles. The third relies on the daily life experiences of local individuals and societies that reveal the opportunities and constraints that affect women.

I will confine my analysis to the second and third categories, and will analyse Hamas' gender ideology and its impact on gender relationships. I will also analyse the daily life experiences of Islamist women within Hamas' political infrastructure, to learn what attracts so many of them to socio-political movements that some feminists consider inimical to the progress and liberation of women.

Islamist women, whether independently active or working in conjunction with various Islamist movements, are a subject of discussion among feminist researchers, particularly on what could be considered as feminist in the tenets of religious and fundamentalist movements that openly reject women's total equality with men. Saba Mahmood puts forward two core issues she believes are the cornerstone of the feminist's incompatibility with religion; the first is that religion is essentially a masculine matter that historically relegated women to a dependency status; the second and more modern view is the rise of political-religious movements in the United States, the Middle East and South Asia whose aims are considered inimical to women's interests.<sup>12</sup> If we understand the term *feminism* to mean any movement that consciously rejects thoughts and practices that foster gender-based discrimination, and actively works to remove all injustice



based on gender, then some see a certain truth in the term 'Islamic feminism'. For example, Azza Karam applies the term to Islamist women who draw up their political and social agendas clearly within the confines of political Islam. They are feminists because they are fully aware of the various forms of persecution women are subjected to, and seek to actively redress the situation based on Islamic principles. They insist on fairness by making resources and rights available to women, and advocate women's 'complementarity' rather than total equality with men.<sup>13</sup> Karam defends the use of the term 'Islamic feminism' because it creates a positive distinction, within the Islamist Movement itself, between those who call for the fair treatment of women and those who do not. She adds that the term's use also opens the door to potential overlapping with other forms of feminism.

In a similar vein, Mir-Hosseini defines *feminism* in the broadest sense possible based on the fact that women are discriminated against at work, at home and in society, and that feminism is a series of actions that aim to improve women's lives and change their lot in life. She also supports the term from the political point of view, as a means of introducing Islamist feminists and learning what they stand for. She believes that the term should be preserved because it places women's demands in a political context that is not isolated from other feminist movements and experiences elsewhere in the world. Mir-Hosseini realizes that in the twentieth century, feminism has become an integral part of world politics and, by being a part of it, Muslim women can affect its agenda and benefit from it. Based on that, she calls for the re-evaluation of the approach that uncritically identifies Western feminism as the ultimate modernization model, and says that in order for Muslim women to contribute to world feminism, the dialogue should make room for other feminist theories based on actual gender policies in Muslim societies in which religion is a major factor.<sup>14</sup>

Margot Badran, on the other hand, understands the 'unease' that many activists feel towards the term 'feminism', and proposes 'gender activism' instead. She distinguishes between feminism as a political practice and feminism as a concept that grants its adherents a particular identity. She says that some women practise various forms of feminism but refuse to be identified with the term, and that she coined the term 'gender activism' with these women in mind.<sup>15</sup>

## **The Islamists between 'authenticity' and internationalism**

Islamists and the Islamist movements often raise the issue of ‘authenticity’ vs. Westernization to weaken the position of those who challenge the usually male-dominated religious hierarchy. Accusations of ‘lacking cultural authenticity’ soon follow against Islamist women trying to reconcile between Islam and human rights. This sparked a debate in academic feminist circles regarding whether it is at all possible to adopt cross-cultural values in order to achieve women’s rights and empowerment. Some agree that this sort of framework should indeed be applied to cultural values to assess whether they merit preservation.<sup>16</sup> However, those who criticize generalization and the application of international values to local issues believe that cultural diversity should be taken into account, and that people from any given culture should avoid taking patriarchal positions vis-à-vis others, and refrain from imposing the practices and values of dominant groups on others.<sup>17</sup> Anne Phillips believes that calling for the implementation of cross-cultural rights renders cultural diversity a rather foggy notion. It does not take into consideration the fact that the rules of justice are always linked to the social setup in which they were formulated, and therefore reflect values and practices specific to that society. Phillips also believes that there is no general ‘truth’ beyond local contexts.

It is important to take a critical position towards both approaches. On the one hand, one cannot envision a single common understanding of ‘culture’ on which there is consensus in any given society, and where ‘everyone’ agrees that habits and practices that entrench male domination are worth preserving.<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, and in the same vein, common rights should be based on a comprehensive understanding of a given society’s historic, social, economic and political context, on the total participation of women in the discussion, on reaching an agreement over which rights should be defended, and on finding out which infrastructure would be amenable, or not amenable, to their implementation as a precondition to drawing up a general agenda for all women.

### **Some introductory issues: who are the Islamist women?**

The term ‘Islamist women’ is applied to women who belong to the Islamist movement, and are active in the public sphere in order to advocate for what Keddie calls ‘an Islamic State that imposes at least some Islamic laws and

customs'.<sup>19</sup> In the Palestinian context, various Islamic dress codes indicate the presence of differences among Islamist groups and their political agendas. Hamas is trying gradually to re-educate and re-Islamize the masses by taking upon itself the formation of an Islamist government. As for the Islamic Jihad and the al-Tahrir (Liberation) Party, they advocate taking power by force to re-Islamize the state and society.<sup>20</sup> These movements developed in the context of their confrontation with the secular national movement, and under its influence.

## **The Israeli occupation and the emergence of a new elite**

The 'new Islamists' are different from those who were active under the British Mandate or Jordanian rule. The old generation of Muslim Brotherhood members came mainly from well-to-do families in urban areas, while the new generation comes mainly from peasant stock in the Gaza Strip who became refugees after the *nakba* of 1948. Members of the old founding generation (Ahmad Yassin, Ibrahim Yazouri, Abdel-Fattah Dokhan, Mohammad Hassan Sahm and others) were school teachers and religious sheikhs in secondary positions. The second generation (Mahmoud al-Zahar, Abdel-Aziz al-Rantisi, Salah Shehadeh, Issa al-Nashar, Ismail abou-Shanab and Mousa Abou Marzouk) came from poor backgrounds in refugee camps and were trained as doctors, engineers, school principals and university professors in various Arab universities.<sup>21</sup> Their supporters were mainly students from poor conservative families, religious leaders and professionals.

The degree of religious commitment in a given society cannot be understood except when seen as part of a complex system of beliefs that do not necessarily centre around an inescapable social or political vision associated with political Islam. There is nothing inevitable about Hamas' growing influence and power: the deteriorating economic situation after Oslo nourished the Islamists' popularity<sup>22</sup> due to their many institutions that provided services and care for a large section of the population, especially women. One can gauge the shifting power and influence of Hamas in the West Bank, and especially in the Gaza Strip, based on these economic, national and political backgrounds. The Islamists' social institutions have

become vital economic and social frameworks for young women seeking either employment or opportunities for public activism.

### ***Sharia* politics and the potential for establishing a common ground of dialogue and action**

When we review the writings of women who were active in Hamas between 1997 and 2004 (i.e. before Hamas came to power in 2006), we arrive at a number of important conclusions based on thorough interviews with women leaders in the movement, and a review of the many documents presented at women's conferences organized by these activists between 1997 and 2003. One of the most important conclusions is that the nature of the Islamist discourse is determined by the political framework surrounding the movement rather than by religious texts. There is a constant reinterpretation of *sharia* texts to suit the movement's day-to-day needs.<sup>23</sup> On the one hand, these reinterpretations do not only challenge the discourse of feminist NGOs that base themselves on the principle of individual rights, and that ignore the hardships that the people endure under occupation. By implanting Islam at the core of an amended Palestinian nationalism, the Islamists wrenched away the feminist discourse's legitimacy by portraying feminists as Westernized and devoid of patriotism. On the other hand, this 'amended' *sharia* formula is a challenge to the self-contradictory Palestinian secularism that uses Islam as a source of its legitimacy. By Islamizing Palestine and identifying patriotism with Islam, the Islamists configured a form of Palestinian nationalism, of which Islam is an integral part, to become an indomitable force in mobilizing the masses.

Under such circumstances, and despite the pressure they placed on the Islamists and the degree to which they defied them, the secularists lose ground when they call for individual rights without a national agenda, and in the absence of any organization capable of public mobilization. The effectiveness of non-governmental organizations, active in the political arena and trying to promote an instantaneous culture to suit short-term projects, is not up to creating an alternative setup.<sup>24</sup> The Islamists were able to set up their political organization while they were still an opposition movement fighting against the PNA, which, since its foundation in 1994, had been violating the civil and political rights of the opposition, especially the Islamists. In comparison, women's NGOs lack proper organization, and

what little support they have comes from a faltering authority whose legitimacy is on the wane.

Moreover, the Islamists absorbed into their ranks another group of women – the majority of whom are educated refugees from poor backgrounds – as well as even poorer groups, in particular the widows of martyrs and wives of prisoners, by providing them with services and defending their husbands' rights. The attention paid to this group comes from a commitment by Hamas women to support those harmed in the line of duty – that is, while resisting occupation – a strategy the PLO and its women members once followed before opting for the path of 'peace and negotiations'. The PLO's abandonment of this course opened the door wide for Hamas' activists in general, and the Movement's women in particular, to reach a large cross-section of women, a very important addition to any political strategy at this stage of national liberation.

I alluded in another context<sup>25</sup> to two different cases in which *sharia* law was used as a guiding principle of women's rights, though in contradictory ways, in the discussion sparked by secular feminist organizations to amend the Civil Status Law based on Islamic *sharia*, which began in 1998 in the context of the shadow parliament, and is still ongoing today.

*Sharia* was used first by the Islamists as an immutable, sacred, linguistic formula in order to wrench away the legitimacy of non-Islamist women's groups, and to silence them. At the same time, it was used to remove any legitimacy from the notion of popular sovereignty called for by the PNA. It is still not clear whether the Islamists are seeking an alternative setup, namely a sovereignty based on God's rule, especially since their statehood project has not been made public yet.

It is on that basis that a number of feminists warned against celebrating the positive participation rates and high levels of interaction within conservative social movements. Some believe that social citizenship, which attracts large numbers of activist women, could be used in certain countries by fundamentalists seeking to establish a political society and promote objectives that could eventually lead to an authoritarian religious state, with hard-line views on gender discrimination.<sup>26</sup> The information I have, however, shows that in the course of seeking a foothold as a national movement, the Islamists were compelled to borrow new ideas in order to respond to public needs, and expand their base of support. Challenges by their opponents forced them to address notions like pluralism, human rights,

women's rights, the public interest, sustainable development and the social self vs. the individual self, all notions that the Islamists borrowed and adopted right out of their original secular contexts.

However, despite the fact that there were some instances of rapprochement between the women of the Islamist Movement and those from secular and feminist movements, there is also a host of contradictions that can eventually lead to a regression, and a retreat towards more rigid interpretations of Islam, which could have a negative effect on women. Among these contradictions are that women should think of themselves once again only as producers of the nation's future generations and as the dependants and followers of men, and the ambiguity of their positions vis-à-vis certain hot topics such as polygamy, men's authority over women (*qawwamah*) and women's right to divorce, to name just a few. Despite the above, I believe that the type of Islamic state these movements might lead to still depends largely on the general framework set up by the secularists, and the level of commitment to the rules that define the relationship with other groups.

The Islamist women's discourse is not only drawn from the Qur'an, but also from their positive contacts with other groups, whether national or secular feminist groups. In my opinion, this kind of contact provides Islamist women with the motive to return to the religious text, and search for new possible interpretations in response to the challenges posed by other women's and feminist groups. The Islamist women's discourse is not only based on religious texts, but also on what other women say and do. This contact between different groups could be the common ground that unifies Islamist, secular and nationalist women through new interpretations of certain religious texts, and through dealing with women's day-to-day realities in the context of a yet unachieved national liberation. This mutual engagement requires that, rather than taking hostile positions against each other, each party, whether they be feminist NGOs or members of the Islamist Movement, should be aware of the changes in the other and in its discourse.

I therefore believe that the Islamists should have based their positions on what modernity has brought women in terms of employment and educational opportunities. In this case, the type of state the Islamists would seek will not depend on a ready-made model based on a religious text, but a state and a society based on daily realities, and on the visions and

challenges put forward by the nationalist and secular groups, especially if supported by a considerable majority that has enough clout to produce an impact.

This kind of networking requires that each side recognize the other's existence and legitimacy of views. The conflict in the name of feminism, to which I alluded at the beginning of this chapter, between some Fateh women and the Islamist women who assumed positions at the Ministry of Women's Affairs after the elections, was not really a conflict over feminist issues as much as it was a disagreement around political choices. Through this conflict, each party is trying, through rather undemocratic means, to safeguard its status in a PNA whose mainstays were greatly threatened by the Islamists' arrival to power.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Bir Zeit University, Palestine.

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4. Jamil Hilal (2002), 'Secularism in Palestinian political culture: a tentative discourse', *HAGAR, International Social Science Review*, 3(1), p. 1.

5. Ibid.

6. Salameh Ghassan (2001), *Democracy without Democrats? The Renewal of Politics in the Muslim World* (London: I.B.Tauris), p. 8.

7. Deniz Kandiyoti (1998), 'Bargaining with patriarchy', *Gender and Society*, 2(3), p. 283.

8. Deniz Kandiyoti (1991), *Women, Islam and the State* (London, Macmillan Press), p. 410.

9. Sondra Hale (1997), 'The women of Sudan's National Islamic Front', in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds), *Political Islam: Essays from the Middle East Report* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 234.

10. Nikki R. Keddie (1979), 'Problems in the study of Middle Eastern women', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 10, pp. 225–40; and Judith Tucker (1983), 'Problems in the historiography of women in the Middle East: the case of nineteenth century Egypt', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 15, pp. 321–36.

11. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, p. 3.

12. Saba Mahmood (1996), 'Feminism and religious difference', a paper presented at the Carsten Niebuhr Institute of Near Eastern Studies Conference, *Women, Culture and Modernity*, Copenhagen (18–21 February), p. 2.

13. Azza Karam (1998), *Women, Islamism and the State: Contemporary Feminisms in Egypt* (London: Macmillan Press; New York: St. Martin's Press), pp. 10, 235.

14. Mir-Hosseini, *Islam and Gender*, pp. 6, 7, 9.
15. Margot Badran (1994), 'Gender activism: feminists and Islamists in Egypt', in V. M. Moghadam (ed.), *Identity Politics and Women: Cultural Reassertions and Feminisms in International Perspective* (Boulder: Westview Press), p. 202.
16. Martha Nussbaum (2002), 'Women's capabilities and social justice', in Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi (eds), *Gender Justice, Development and Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 119.
17. Anne Phillips (2002), 'Multiculturalism, universalism, and the claims of democracy', in Maxine Molyneux and Shahra Razavi (eds), *Gender Justice, Development and Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 119.
18. Ibid., p. 137.
19. Excerpt from Karam, *Women, Islamisms and the State*, p. 16.
20. Iyad Barghouti (2000), *Political Islam in Palestine: What Lies Behind Politics* (Arabic) (al-Quds Media and Communications Center, JMCC, Jerusalem), pp. 43–6.
21. Barghouti, *Political Islam in Palestine*, pp. 57–9; and Khaled Abou al-Omrein (2000), *Hamas: The Islamic Resistance Movement in Palestine* (Arabic) (Arab Cultural Center, Cairo), p. 257.
22. The term 'Islamists' refers here to the Islamist movements' resistance fighters, and their supporters.
23. For more information, see Islah Jad (2005), 'Islamist women of Hamas: a new women's movement?', in Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone (ed.), *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in a Global Era* (New York: Feminist Press).
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## CHAPTER 16

### Palestinian Feminist Organizations in the Post-Oslo Era: The Binary Nature of Feminist Discourse\*

*Eileen Kuttab\*\**

#### **The impact of political developments on the women's movement**

Tackling the Palestinian social or feminist movements at this delicate juncture would not be of any use if the approach is not critical, or if it takes place outside the Palestinian political context, with its Arab and international links. It is clear that in the past two decades, any separation between the global situation and the political, economic and social conditions of the Arab world in general, and of the Palestinian occupied territories in particular, has become much more difficult. For it is impossible to understand the highly complex changes and challenges facing the region if we do not first understand globalization and the mechanisms it uses to spread its economy to societies around the world. The reason is that the relationship between the international, regional and local is dialectic, interconnected and all-inclusive, whose multifaceted impact does not only affect the economy, but all other aspects and domains of life as well. Globalization's hegemony on the regional and local levels cannot happen in a vacuum. Local or national factors, a particular political system, civil society or developmental, economic and social visions that is harmonious with the international system, globalization and its neoliberal ideology, afford it the space it needs to evolve. The presence of these factors is vital for the success of globalization because their absence, or incompatibility with it, would force the international capitalist system and Zionist

movement to intervene directly (i.e. militarily) to change the balance of power within the class and national struggles, and steal the material and human resources, as happened in Iraq and Palestine, the reinvasion of the West Bank in 2002 and Gaza in 2006.

It is difficult to ignore such a political model that has through its military and technological supremacy, as well as its economic might, created a culture of submission and fear, whereby national and local systems choose to comply with it as their only means of coexisting with it and benefiting from the economic assistance it provides. This does not mean, however, that there is total submission to the status quo; there remains a certain level of challenge that manifests itself in novel forms of resistance that seek to sever the unequal ties of this relationship in order to gain a certain measure of independence from the hegemonic power.

This study examines the condition of these social movements, especially the women's movement and those women's organizations and institutions that became in the post-Oslo Agreement period, since 1993, supporters of the ideology of globalization. They adopted Westernized agendas that, on the one hand, are unrelated to national issues and, on the other, make it seem as though we had already completed our struggle, by reflecting issues that represent neither the priorities of the current condition of women, nor the needs of the feminist sector.

## **Transformations in the Palestinian women's movement: democratization and decentralization**

The Palestinian women's movement developed at the beginning of the last century as an inseparable part of the Palestinian national movement, and expressed national aspirations as well as, more particularly, those of women. Because of this direct relationship, women played a key role in the national movement and were the main protectors of the family during all its national crises.

In the 1970s, social movements, including women's organizations, democratized and decentralized and replaced women's charitable societies. This new configuration proved effective in organizing different social groups to challenge the occupation's policies. It also succeeded in mobilizing and organizing popular groups, including those in the women's sector, and in establishing an agenda that responded simultaneously to the

requirements of national liberation and of the women's cause. It raised feminist awareness, and activated, consolidated and rooted feminist identity in a manner that attracted and mobilized women in both feminist and nationalist activities.

## **Feminist action strategies during the first popular *intifada***

The new women's movement, with its popular feminist cadres, represented the vanguard of democratic action and, through its continuous grass-roots activities with women in villages and refugee camps, became the backbone of the resistance in the First Intifada of 1987. Alongside other popular organizations, the movement took over the local authority's role in providing services and support to the people, and helping local communities remain steadfast in their resistance to the occupation's policies, which imposed on them continuous and exceedingly harsh conditions. It adopted a comprehensive growth and development model that not only addressed national issues, but other social, economic and cultural issues as well. Moreover, although the discourse on gender (*alnaw' alijtima 'i*) had not yet crystallized at the time, particular focus was placed on women's rights, especially the right to struggle, work, receive an education and take part in political decision-making, in total equality with men. These rights are still an inseparable part of the feminist agenda, although their content, definition and meaning were rather different then from what they are today, given the different political context, and the impact of donor countries and international organizations. (As we shall see later, the latter replaced the original discourse with a more modern liberal one that targeted individual women rather than society as a whole.) Feminist committees and groups helped raise women's political awareness through participation in the struggle and, to strengthen national identity, promoted national production to replace Israeli products and boycott them. The committees also established a popular education system to replace the regular schools closed by the occupation for an extended period of time, during the *intifada*, and provided services to local communities to support the *intifada* and promote women's role in public life. These activities played a major and decisive role in simultaneously keeping the *intifada* alive and empowering women.

## **Another stage of resistance, but this time without women**

The second stage of resistance began with the al-Aqsa Intifada and the post-Oslo period, 1993–2000, and marks the beginning of a different stage of the popular resistance due to the Oslo Agreement's failure to qualitatively improve people's lives. The Second Intifada was a more violent one that sidelined the public, especially women, from political activism, and resulted in their absence from the daily activities of the resistance, adversely affecting their future performance in the political and feminist movements.

The Oslo Agreement fostered a more optimistic political atmosphere among the Palestinian people, which led to a decline in national resistance due to the relatively lower level of daily pressure by the occupation authorities. The women's movement was no exception, and it was compelled to turn its attention, in a more immediate and less strategic manner, to women's issues and close its eye to matters of national importance, or those that responded to the needs of most women. As a result, confusion seeped in among the popular organizations and weakened their mobilization and organizational roles, especially since they adopted a separate and alien feminist strategy, robbed of its political and national dimensions. The issues at hand no longer had a clear connection to national concerns. This led, in the transitional period, to the emergence of an elitist leadership that drew its legitimacy from funding agencies, and held itself accountable to the international rather than the local community. In the meantime, the weakness of leftist opposition parties and their inability to keep up their activism and effectiveness, due to their poor acumen in dealing with the radical changes brought about by the Oslo Agreement, their absence of internal democracy, and the growing power and monopoly of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) over civil society, all weakened the Palestinian legacy and led to a decline in the role of the feminist movement.

### **The gist of the struggle: national and feminist**

In each stage of the national struggle, women in general, and feminist organizations in particular, have had to face various challenges that manifested themselves in different ways. Some were directly linked to the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the nature and practices of the occupation, and others to the nature of the PNA's political system, the male-dominated national movement and the patriarchal mindset of Palestinian society. This

impacted on development projects that relied, for the most part, on the funding agencies' programmes, chief among which is legal reform, the elimination of gender-based discrimination in government policies, the integration of women in ministries, planning based on gender equality, organization of training workshops on democracy and good governance, political reform, tackling specific issues such as domestic violence and income-generating projects to reduce poverty.<sup>1</sup> Despite the importance of these issues, they are elitist, and are denuded of the national dimensions at the top of the list of priorities for most women.

Among the results of this development is the weakness of the popular resistance, at the forefront of which women once stood, and the feminist agenda's alienation from the daily problems of most Palestinian women. The latter were left unprotected to fend for themselves in cases like the martyrdom or detention of the family's main breadwinner, not to mention poverty and unemployment, issues that Palestinian families have had to contend with, without any assistance, on a daily basis. Adding to the difficulties was the geographic separation between the two parts of Palestine, the difficulty in movement between Gaza and the West Bank, the presence of parallel authorities, and the internal struggle between Fateh, which represents the PNA, and Hamas, which has been using Gaza as the main arena of its political activism since the decisive military confrontation in 2006. This laid the ground for the large chasm between the leadership and the public, and reflected itself on the feminist movement and the popular base, which became increasingly dislocated. This chasm only increased with the type of projects that most women's organizations were implementing.

On another front, this period was characterized by a weak democratic opposition that failed to maintain its activism and vitality, due to its shaky infrastructure, classical formation and culture, unclear vision and programmes, and traditional attitude towards certain social women's issues, such as the *hijab*.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the overarching control by the PNA, its institutionalization of power and the monopoly of its official authoritarian infrastructure that relies on its symbolic identity and historic legitimacy limited civil society's activities, and checked its growth through a series of bureaucratic measures.

However, the most important and most dangerous internal challenge to the women's movement, at the current stage, is its transformation from a

popular to an elitist movement. The expansion and multiplication of professional civic institutions, coupled with their bias towards a globalized agenda and success in obtaining the lion's share of funding, allowed them to assume a larger role in feminist activism and, in a distorted way, supplant the more popular-oriented women's organizations.

Furthermore, the current schism between Fateh and Hamas over the Oslo Agreement has created a similar schism within the feminist movement. The fragmentation of political programmes and the contradictions within them made any mending of political fences among different factions exceedingly difficult. This reflected itself on the feminist cadres and committees, and left its mark on the effectiveness and dynamics of the women's movement as a whole. However, these factors did not take place in isolation of occupation policies that strove to further restrict movement by increasing military roadblocks and completing the construction of the racist wall. This exacerbated the unemployment crisis by making the movement of people much more difficult.

### **The institutionalization of women's activism: decline of popular activism**

In the early 1990s, a plethora of women's organizations, professional, civic and non-governmental organizations appeared on the scene and played an important but controversial role within the feminist movement. For various reasons, chief among which was their inability to express their personal feminist issues inside the political party, many women left political parties to form professional institutions specializing in women's affairs. What distinguished these groups from other typical women's organizations of the 1970s and 1980s was the type of activities they pursued, the nature of their programmes and the issues they chose to address.

The increase in the number of organizations focusing on human rights, both as discourse and practice, became one of the modern and prevailing trends in the development of Arab women's movements in general, and Palestinian movements in particular. This increase reflected, on the one hand, the failure of Arab regimes, including the PNA, to promote and reflect women's rights,<sup>3</sup> and, on the other, the failure of civil society to maintain its activism and protect its achievements due to its inability to balance between women's national and social rights. Although women's

movements have traditionally promoted equality and social justice, as principles and slogans inherent to the national agenda, and despite becoming part of these organizations' ideological framework,<sup>4</sup> the occupation prevented the promotion and further development of these achievements. It is worth mentioning in this context that the PNA, which to a certain extent supported women's rights, has never gone beyond the conditions and rules of the Civil Status Law, which is based on Islamic *sharia*. This is why these organizations' inception was a direct result of the absence of democracy and the PNA's lack of interest in gender issues on the one hand, and a result of the political process and peace agreements that fostered an active political environment on the other. The elitist women's movement saw this moment as an opportunity to integrate gender, via specialized and professional work, in the national policies still being formed. These leaders made their presence felt on the national stage thanks to their international funding and, at the same time, adopted a new agenda directed at the formulation of policies, recommendations and advocacy programmes that focus on building the capacity of women's organizations in drafting preliminary documents for feminist regional and international conferences, and writing local reports and action plans, based on foreign assessments and the recommendations of international conferences.

This political duality within the women's movement separates the public domain from the private by denuding gender of its political dimension – that is, by isolating the 'national and political' from the 'private' (i.e. 'gender'). This, in turn, has robbed the feminist struggle of its political character, without having yet addressed or mended these challenges, a fact that has deepened the structural imbalance between the rights of women linked to their practical and strategic needs, and the requirements of the national struggle.

### **Local and international agendas: harmonious or contradictory?**

When reviewing a sample of women's civic issues and programmes in Latin America, South Africa and the Arab countries, I noticed a similarity between these programmes and the Palestinian women's agenda, despite the different social and political environments. What is noteworthy is that in matters related to gender, the same similarity also exists between the

international and regional agendas. If we look, for example, at the role of United Nations agencies, such as the United Nations Development Programme and United Nations Development Fund for Women, we find that their decisions on feminist and gender programmes, and the decisions of different UN resolutions and international conferences on women, such as the 1995 Beijing Conference, impose normalization with, and inclusion of, international agendas at the local level. We could say that these issues trickle down from their original sources – the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank – to international and donor agencies, such as United Nations organizations and other donor agencies, then down to the local agendas. Programmes are streamlined and distributed at all levels, either through international conferences and workshops, or through particular funding philosophies and conditions.<sup>5</sup> However, despite the fact that some of the professional feminist organizations were established in response to local requirements, the competition for funding and need for sustainability made this inclusion unavoidable. Moreover, it is worth noting that under the claim of improving democracy, the World Bank has officially adopted the policy of promoting and developing civil society organizations, in order to replace state services to poor and marginalized groups in society.<sup>6</sup> These policies were adopted by developing countries in the 1980s and in Palestine in the 1990s, which further encouraged the expansion of civic organizations, especially in light of the PNA's limited abilities and poor civic performance compared to civil society, in the period preceding Oslo. The time was right for civil organizations to develop a new working method that employs a paid staff, and confines its activities to providing services or launching advocacy campaigns on women's rights, instead of having to depend on memberships, public gatherings and street or popular committees, which made these organizations an alternative to both the PNA and popular institutions.

It also became clear that compared to the international conferences of the 1990s, which were more politicized and sensitive to local and regional environments since they had to deal with political issues such as the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the Palestinian refugees, the Beijing conference avoided local and regional issues, and concentrated on the more global and comprehensive ones. The 'women's rights are human rights' slogan was adopted by United Nations organizations. A consensus programme requiring commitment on the lowest common denominator was



put in place, with no link whatsoever with the local context and, in our case, with the national cause or the issues and needs of Palestinian women under colonial occupation.

To deduce that local civic organizations have become extensions of international ones – though it is difficult to generalize and apply the premise to all women's organizations, since we are referring here to specialized civic organizations that practised feminist activities with professional proficiency – would constitute a threat to the future and fate of all Palestinian women and feminist movements. The first reason is that the Palestinian feminist agendas do not reflect the strategic needs of women, and are more in line with global agendas and their contents. The second reason is that these agendas were emptied of their genuine content when their political character was removed, the women's programme was separate from the comprehensive national programme and issues like the refugees, detainees, settlements, borders, unemployment and poverty were set aside. This is where the need to formulate an agenda that integrates gender into national issues arises, especially since the current agenda of the women's movement is relatively detached from reality. This is bound to diminish the credibility of these movements, isolate them from the public, and reinforce the role of the elitist class of educated and technocratic women who identify with the global agenda, a pragmatic agenda without a clear direction.

### **A new culture: 'the globalized centre'**

Among other factors impacting the activities of social movements, especially the feminist movement and its deviation from the historic political culture, is draining popular institutions of their qualified politicized female cadres in favour of professional civic organizations. This factor deprived popular activities of their effective cadres, and deprived political factions, social movements and public institutions of the benefit of having qualified and experienced staff members. Furthermore, some well-qualified women have become technocrats answerable to international donors and agendas, instead of their own feminist base. Moreover, female cadres that left the women's movement and political parties have changed their lives, work styles and experience and, in the process, lost their historic role in the steadfast resistance to the occupation. They developed new criteria, values

and skills conducive to drafting proposals according to Western and international norms, as well as reports, papers and documents for international workshops and conferences in line with pre-determined terms of reference that leave no room for creativity or thought. The drainage of qualified cadres also leads to losing the legacy of local history, and the ability to express realities on the ground. And because most of these organizations focus on projects rather than programmes, their cadres lose their strategic vision and analytical and critical abilities, and become mere technical tools in the hands of the international donor society.<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, professional activism fragmented women's organizations into a variety of professional groups that depend on the nature of the issue at hand and the kind of service required. The provision of partial and varied services disperses the feminist struggle and expertise, and limits its ability to see the larger picture; exaggerated professionalism fragments any comprehensive understanding of feminist issues, and separates gender's practical and strategic needs, leaving no link between them at all.

## **New structural and political challenges**

If we look at the condition of women in general, we would find that it is confused and in decline, especially in the wake of the Second Intifada. We would also find that the most urgent problems of women, such as poverty resulting from unemployment or the imprisonment or death of a husband or son (i.e. the main breadwinner), have not only remained without solution but have actually grown worse. The participation of women in the labour market is still at its lowest level, and their involvement in the political process has actually diminished without having achieved equal rights in any domain. In my opinion, two factors account for this failure: the first is the occupation and its destructive impact on the economic, political and social levels; and the second is the transformation of social movements, including those of women, into specialized and elitist organizations that work to further the interests of global agendas that do not represent most ordinary women's priorities.

A look at the funded women's projects in the occupied Palestinian territories will no doubt show that most of them tackle feminist issues that have nothing to do with the national struggle. Most programmes use concepts like 'equity', the protection of women's rights and their

‘empowerment’, in a reform-oriented context, rather than in one of transformation or drastic change. Violence against women, especially domestic violence, is thus addressed in isolation of the general political and structural violence, or the individual or group’s loss of personal security. By the same token, poverty, and the need to curb it, is addressed without attending to its radical causes, namely the occupation and the PNA’s economic and developmental policies that have failed to create the productive infrastructure base necessary to expand the local labour market. Today, these subjects are the bread and butter of various women’s projects, focusing essentially on advocacy, consciousness-raising campaigns, legal reform and education, inclusion of gender in general policies, training election candidates and establishing income-generating projects for women – all individual solutions that lack the necessary structural formula that would help them integrate the official labour market. Despite these projects’ importance to women, they target problems individually without proposing any collective solutions to the problems of women in general.

The defining question therefore is: How can these activities have a positive impact on the condition most women are in, introduce significant changes to their daily lives, and provide solutions to their problems, yet preserve their link to the overarching national project?

The increasing demand for funding by civic organizations, and the competition for survival, especially among women’s organizations, deepens the relationship of dependency with the donor, and imposes a local agenda that serves the funding agenda’s purposes. Moreover, the ongoing vicious circle that these organizations have put themselves in, in order to comply with the donor agencies’ requirements, whether in terms of the conditions attached or time period required to complete the project (which is usually unrealistic), has deprived them of the time and space necessary to reconsider or amend their agendas to include a number of feminist priorities, or those of the feminist sector that receive no funding.

One also notices that, to fit into the donor agencies’ agendas, most feminist organizations have integrated the topic of ‘empowerment’ into their programmes, at a time when empowerment is really possible only in places where there is independence, sovereignty and freedom, rather than colonial occupation. It is, however, possible for the genuine empowerment of women to be transformed into a political force directed at effectively changing the current power play in gender relations, instead of struggling

within the confines of a relationship based on a traditional division of labour. Furthermore, empowerment should not be limited to individuals; individual ambitions should be in harmony with collective ambitions, and complementary to them. The main obstacle that prevents freedom and democratic transformation from taking root is in the alienation of people from the political process, and hence their marginalization.<sup>8</sup>

## **Final remarks: What can be done?**

In the life of Palestinian society, this time is a challenge to all democratic forces and social movements in the sense that – if their activities and programmes do not once again target the masses; if they do not become more transparent and express people's needs and aspirations; if they are not able to redefine their priorities and focus on a more decentralized structure, in which women help define their priorities in a manner that allows the integration of their hopes and aspirations in the policies and activities of women's organizations, as was the case in the 1980s when women were the backbone of the *intifada*; and if these organizations do not become genuinely democratic and representative of the people's needs – if none of that happens, both the women's movement, and the feminist movement in particular, would have laid the ground for their own decline, and a very considerable decline at that.

One of the major lessons that all social movements should learn is that responding to the people's aspirations, regaining their trust, protecting their interests and providing for their needs are the only genuine sources of legitimacy and credibility, as well as success in ensuring the rights of marginalized sectors.

## **Notes**

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Bir Zeit University, Palestine.

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2. Rema Hammami and Eileen Kuttub (1999), 'The Palestinian women's movement: strategies towards freedom and democracy', in *News from Within*, XV(4).

3. Islah Jad (2003), 'The NGO-ization of the Arab Women's Movements', *al-Raida*, Centenary Issue, 20(100) (Winter).

4. Eileen Kuttab (1996), 'The Palestinian women's document: a tool for women's empowerment and struggle', in S. Sabbagh (ed.), *Arab Women: Between Defiance and Restraint* (Olive Branch Press, New York).
5. Eileen Kuttab (2008), 'Palestinian women's organisations: global cooption and local contradiction', *Cultural Dynamics*, 20(2), p. 99.
6. Christina Ewig (1999), 'The strengths and limits of the NGO women's movement model: shaping Nicaragua's democratic institutions', in *Latin America Research Review*, 34(3), pp. 75–102.
7. Eileen Kuttab, 'Palestinian women's organisations', p. 99.
8. Eileen Kuttab (2010), 'Empowerment as resistance: conceptualizing Palestinian women's empowerment', *Development*, 53(2), pp. 247–53.

## Further reading

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- (2003) 'The NGO-ization of the Arab women's movements', *al-Raida*, 20(100).
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## CHAPTER 17

# Liberation Struggles: Reflections on the Palestinian Women's Movement

*Amal Amireh\**

A few weeks after the 2008–9 Israeli attack on Gaza, in which 1,400 Palestinian men, women and children were killed, as an apathetic world watched the action on TV, a Gaza woman was found stabbed to death in her parents' home. We don't know her name or why she was murdered, although from the way the news article was written it seems safe to assume that she was killed by a relative – a father or brother.<sup>1</sup> Soon after that incident, which we are not likely to hear about again, Hamas in Gaza required that women lawyers cover their heads while at work.<sup>2</sup> This decision was later rescinded following protests by Palestinian human rights organizations and the Palestinian Lawyers' Union, but Hamas continued a policy of restricting personal freedoms and a campaign of moral policing of Gaza's streets and beaches. Twenty-year-old Yusra al Aazami was shot in the head by men affiliated with Hamas for walking on the beach with her fiancé.<sup>3</sup> In the West Bank, Rima Najjar was fired as the chair of the English Department at the American University in Jenin after some students accused her of insulting the Divine Being for teaching Murjana Satratpi's graphic novel *Persopolis*.<sup>4</sup> More recently, actor and director Juliano Mer-Khamis was shot to death in front of The Freedom Theatre, which he had established in the Jenin refugee camp. He was accused of 'corrupting the morals of the Muslim youth and pushing them to rebel against the customs of our society'.<sup>5</sup> Women and gender relations were central to Mer-Khamis' 'corrupting' project.

What connects these stories is that they concern Palestinian women directly, have serious implications for Palestinian society at large and were all met by the silence of the women's movement. There was no collective feminist or womanist response to any of these incidents: no statement, no op-ed piece and no demonstration.<sup>6</sup>

How do we understand this silence? I argue that it is the logical consequence of the recent history of the Palestinian women's movement, a movement that has consistently avoided engaging with three taboos in Palestinian political life: sexuality, militarization and religion. A prioritization paradigm that dominated secular nationalist politics has held this movement hostage for decades. According to this paradigm, 'women's issues' are always deferred to a later, more suitable moment either because other more pressing issues, like national liberation, have priority or because high political risks of legitimacy and influence are involved in bringing them up when 'society' is not ready.<sup>7</sup> In what follows I will outline the recent history of this movement in the hope that the past may teach us something about the future.

While Palestinian women were always part of the Palestinian national movement, their role and visibility during the First Intifada (1987–92) were qualitatively different from any time before.<sup>8</sup>

Among other things, this story shows how their participation in the resistance to Israeli occupation manipulated gender stereotypes and roles, thus challenging them even as they were performing them. Women did protect young men, literally putting their bodies between male activists and the soldiers, but they also engaged in many other acts of resistance. The women's committees were the backbone of the civil disobedience that sparked and sustained the First Intifada, from sit-ins and street demonstrations to rock throwing, arranging alternative schooling, collecting garbage, distributing food and working on other networks of support. While the women's role during this period is deservedly well documented,<sup>9</sup> the transformative effect it had on Palestinian society and on the existing political institutions has been exaggerated, not only because the activities were short-lived but also because they remained within conventionally prescribed gender roles.<sup>10</sup>

But even the limited achievements of Palestinian women during the activism of the First Intifada were squandered when the civil uprising

became militarized. As the leadership of the *intifada* became more centralized and less democratic, and as armed young men ruled the streets, women's participation and standing suffered major setbacks. Two campaigns against women mobilized to limit their movement and to delegitimize their nationalist contributions. It is hard not to see that these backlash campaigns were expressions of anxieties regarding the visibility of Palestinian women in the resistance movement and in public life in general, a visibility that, although occurring within the dominant gender ideology, still opened a space in which the gender roles promoted by this ideology could be challenged.

The first was the *hijab* campaign, initiated by the Islamic movement in the summer of 1989 on the heels of its transformation from a group that accommodated the Israeli occupation to one that resisted it. It took the form of harassing and intimidating women who are not veiled (through graffiti, rock throwing and verbal abuse) and developing a discourse in which veiling was viewed not only as a sign of piety but also as one of patriotism. The women's groups could only momentarily halt this campaign of harassment against their activists and rank and file by appealing to the male national leadership, who at the time had the political power to ask the Islamic movement to stop (a power they have long since lost).<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the discourse that equated wearing a *hijab* with patriotism and true Palestinianism continued and was hardly challenged by the secularists, both women and men.

It is hard to say who initiated the second campaign against women, but with the militarization of the First Intifada, hysteria about collaboration swept the West Bank and Gaza. Sexuality was at the centre of this fear of collaboration and women inevitably were caught in its web. The anxiety about the *intifada*'s destabilization of gender roles was expressed in sexual terms as male fear of the female body. That fear took the form of widespread anxiety about Palestinian women using sex to recruit Palestinian men as collaborators with the Israelis. As a result, women were pushed out of public life and were relegated to the patriarchal domestic sphere, all in the name of protecting them, men and the Palestinian Revolution.<sup>12</sup>

Following the Oslo agreement of 1993, the position of the Palestinian women's movement was significantly weakened.<sup>13</sup> Learning from their *intifada* experience that a nationalist agenda alone would not safeguard



their rights, since Islamic and secular patriarchy can mobilize nationalism better than women could, women activists focused their efforts on developing a 'rights' approach for Palestinian women, taking advantage of Oslo's unfulfilled promise of an eventual Palestinian state.<sup>14</sup> This is when the women's NGO movement was born. The street activists of the First Intifada became heads of various NGOs and women's studies centres. The consequences of this professionalization of the women's movement have been profound.<sup>15</sup>

The Palestinian women's NGOs focused their efforts and campaigns on three areas: changing the personal status law; combating violence against women; and lobbying for greater political participation.<sup>16</sup> They won women the right to acquire their own passports without necessarily having the consent of their male guardian, to take driving lessons without the presence of a male relative and to register the births of their children independently of their male relations. In cooperation with the Palestinian Authority, they succeeded in establishing a women's shelter in Nablus. Women lobbyists worked on other feminist issues while still eschewing the 'feminist' label:<sup>17</sup> combating early marriage was one of these issues.<sup>18</sup> They also sought to reform the penal code so that a man who kills a woman and then pleads that he was protecting the family's honour does not get the reduced sentence he currently enjoys. The lobbyists wanted abortion to be legalized in cases of rape and incest, as well as in case of danger to the mother's life, as the law currently stands: they argued, problematically, that in cases of rape and incest, maintaining the pregnancy constitutes a danger to a woman's life since she could be murdered for it, and abortion should in these cases thus be legalized. They sought to change the law that does not allow the prosecution of a rapist if he agrees to marry his victim. They argued for restrictions on polygamy, such as the right of the wife to divorce her husband if he takes another wife, and to permit polygamy only as a way of dealing with health problems, rather than allowing it merely to satisfy the pleasure or the whim of the husband. They asked that the law allow a woman to file a complaint in cases of incest since the current law stipulates that only the child's guardian, usually a man, can do that.<sup>19</sup>

Though hardly radical, these demands were met with much resistance. A lukewarm Palestinian Authority that never took women seriously certainly did not help. An indifferent public was another reason for the limited

success of the women's movements. While women's NGOs put all their efforts into lobbying to change laws, they were lobbyists without a constituency.<sup>20</sup> Grass-roots activism, the mainstay of the Palestinian women's movement in previous decades, fizzled out and was replaced with gender and democracy workshops. The lack of grass-roots activism and the depoliticization of feminist work chipped away at the legitimacy of the women's movement, a legitimacy it had worked hard to gain through the years of the First Intifada. What exacerbated this alienation was the smear campaign that they were subjected to by the Islamists, who were particularly opposed to any challenge to the Personal Status Laws and unwilling to combat patriarchal violence against women.

It did not help the women activists that the Palestinian Authority initiated its own smear campaign because it was resentful of the financial independence of the NGOs and wanted to lay its hands on their money.<sup>21</sup> As a result, the reputation of women's NGOs and women's studies centres was tarnished as they were accused of promoting a 'foreign' agenda that sought to undermine the family, Islam and, of course, Palestine. The fact that they were most often receiving funding from American and European donors did not help matters. The patriotic and nationalist credentials of Palestinian women activists were undermined in one attack after another. This ideological smear campaign found echo among sectors of Palestinian society that were not necessarily committed to Islamic ideology. Secular men felt threatened and marginalized by the new class of professional women that emerged in Palestinian society in the post-Oslo years, and the women's movement predictably lost some of its major allies.

The advent of the Second Intifada in 2000 put the last nail in the coffin of the Palestinian women's movement as we knew it. If Palestinian women were the 'skeletons' (i.e. backbone) of the First Intifada, as one Palestinian activist put it, they became the skeletons in the closet of the Second Intifada.<sup>22</sup> The al-Aqsa Intifada lacked the grass-roots participation and popular mobilization of the first, because it followed from the beginning a hierarchical model of mobilization and was quickly dominated by militias with their own agendas and ethos. At no point were women involved in the decision-making process. Instead, they were asked to be mostly spectators and victims.

It is not surprising that in this context, the woman suicide bomber, along with her male counterpart, emerges in national discourse as the main figure

of resistance. Her rise to prominence, I argue, far from reflecting or advancing Palestinian women's participation in resistance or politics as some claimed, became part of a discourse that was harmful to Palestinian women because it sidelined the majority of them and put them in their traditionally gendered place.<sup>23</sup> To begin with, in the Arab and Palestinian discourse, the female suicide bomber figures prominently in a gendered politics of shame in which she is used to taunt Arab leaders and armies for failing to perform their manly roles in defending the land: 'Look, even a woman is more courageous than you men are!' And what could be more insulting to a man than to be taunted that he is more cowardly than a woman! This shaming ideology is the basis of the taped statement by Ayat al Akhras, the 16-year-old who was the second woman deployed in a suicidal attack and who was consistently referred to as 'the bride of Palestine'. But it was Reem al Riashi, Hamas' first suicide bomber, who left no doubt about the gendered nature of her act. Al Riashi addresses her statement only to the women and children of the Arab nation, refusing to even address the men because she 'no longer sees any men left in our nation except for the few in Palestine and Iraq'.<sup>24</sup> This celebration as a gendered denigration strategy is only part of the reactionary deployment of the female suicide bomber. She proved useful to discredit and disparage Arab feminists and their emancipatory project by standing as a testimony that Arab women are already equal to men and capable of doing men's business, thus giving the lie to those Arab feminists who demand gender equality. Here is what one journalist had to say after Wafa' Idrees, the first suicide bomber, blew herself up:

It is a woman who today teaches you, oh Muslim women, the meaning of true liberation, with which the women's rights activists have tempted you... It is a woman who has now proven that the meaning of [women's] liberation is the liberation of the body from the trials and tribulations of this world...and the acceptance of death with a powerful, courageous embrace.<sup>25</sup>

The Islamist movement sought to capitalize on the woman suicide bomber for their political and social vision of Palestinian society. While reluctant at first to recruit women for suicide attacks, advising, in the words of their leader Ahmad Yassin, that women had best serve in their roles as wives and mothers, Hamas eventually had to change its rhetoric and practice so as to remain competitive with the other factions that were dispatching women on militarized attacks. The first woman that they sent was Reem al Riashi,

quoted above, who was a mother of two small children. Both her family and Palestinian society at large denounced her deployment on the grounds that it was not right to recruit a mother with children who needed her. Thus criticized, Hamas launched a counter-campaign to defend their decision. Central to this defence was the view that the suicide bomber was a model of Islamic womanhood that stood in contrast to all other Palestinian women who did not embrace Islamist political ideology. Hamas needed to spin al Riashi not as merely another Palestinian woman nationalist fighting against the occupation, but as the ideal Muslim woman whose loyalty is first and foremost to her religion.<sup>26</sup>

The most dangerous deployment of the Palestinian woman suicide bomber in the Islamic discourse is the erasure of the history of Palestinian women's national resistance. After the al Riashi operation, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin reversed his earlier opposition to women's participation in suicide attacks by stating that the difficulties facing the men demanded that women be mobilized. He concluded: 'We have entered a new phase of history, in which Palestinian women are willing to fight and to die a martyr's death as the men and youths do.'<sup>27</sup> This notion that the woman suicide bomber marks a new epoch is further emphasized in Hamas propaganda, in which we are told that before the women suicide bombers Palestinian women did not contribute much in the way of resistance, and that it was the Islamists who succeeded in mobilizing and empowering them and qualitatively changing their role.<sup>28</sup>

This discourse has gone almost entirely unchallenged. It rewrites not only Palestinian women's history – a history that did not begin with the suicide bomber – but it also revises Palestinian national history as a whole. It has been used to dismiss the strategies of the popular civil disobedience resistance adopted in the First Intifada and earlier. According to this revisionist discourse, resistance is defined in very narrow terms to mean only militarized action, with the suicide bomber as its most ideal agent.

The most valuable lesson Palestinian feminists can learn from the Islamist movement is that women's issues, and gender issues more broadly, cannot be postponed or marginalized. They are at the core of the Palestinian struggle for liberation and justice. It is heartening to see a new generation of activists rejecting old paradigms and insisting on the indivisibility of the struggle for liberation. The lesbian group Aswat, the queer groups al Qaws and 'Palestinian Queers for BDS' offer new models for political work that

does not believe in postponing issues relating to sexuality and gender to a later time.<sup>29</sup> These groups realize that the prioritizing paradigm that requires that 'social issues' be relegated to a post-liberation time threatens the very existence of feminism and progressive forces in Palestine. Also promising is the mobilization of the Palestinian youth, inspired by the Arab Spring, to demand a voice in their self-determination. The recent protests of ordinary citizens against the brutal murder of university student Aya Bard'eyeh, who was thrown alive in to a deserted well by her uncle, and which resulted in the rewriting of the laws so 'honour crime' murderers are not protected, is also promising because it shows that there is a desire among young people to address what some considered taboo subjects and a willingness by politicians to respond to these demands when pressured. If the killing of Juliano Mer-Khamis in Jenin at the hands of people who objected to his Freedom Theatre is a grim reminder of the risks involved in undertaking this progressive project, the murder of the Italian activist Vittorio Arrigoni in Gaza ten days later at the hands of a *salafi* group is a tragic reminder of the risks involved in postponing this project. Tomorrow is now.

## Notes

\* George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia.

1. Ma'an News Agency (2009), 'UN: violence against Gaza Strip women on the rise', 25 March, available at [www.maannnews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=209432](http://www.maannnews.net/eng/ViewDetails.aspx?ID=209432), accessed 30 July 2013.

2. The Associated Press (2009), 'Gaza judge: female lawyers need head scarf', 26 July, available at [www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32155614/ns/world\\_news-mideastn\\_africa](http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/32155614/ns/world_news-mideastn_africa), accessed 30 July 2013.

3. Ghazi Hamad (2005), 'A murder in Gaza', *Palestine Report*, 11(42), available at [www.palestinereport.ps/article.php?article=743](http://www.palestinereport.ps/article.php?article=743), accessed 30 July 2013.

4. For details on Rima Najjar's story, see Suheir Abu Oksa Dawoud, 'The price of teaching Satrapi in the Palestinian occupied territories', paper circulated on the Association of Middle East Women's Studies e-mail list ([amews@lists.ucla.edu](mailto:amews@lists.ucla.edu)), 9 March 2010.

5. From a statement against Mer Khamis distributed in the Jenin camp before his assassination, quoted in Mohannad Abdel Hamid (2010), '*joul khamis wa vittorio arrigoni: shaja'a wa nubl*' (Jule Khamis and Vittorio Arrigoni: courage and nobility), *al ayyam*, 19 April.

6. The only exception is regarding Hamas' repressive practices in Gaza. These practices have been criticized by Palestinians from Fateh and from leftist political groups; this seems to have emboldened some women to follow in their footsteps. See, for example, Rima Nazzal (2010), 'Women and public and personal freedom in Gaza', *alhewar almutamaden*, available at [www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=235801](http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=235801), accessed 18 January 2011.

7. See Rima Nazzal (2005), 'A feminist reading of the Palestinian local elections in its first stage', *alhewar almutamaden*, available at [www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=32839](http://www.ahewar.org/debat/show.art.asp?aid=32839), accessed 18 January 2011.

8. For works on the role of Palestinian women in the National Movement before the *intifada*, see Ellen L. Fleischmann (2003), *The Nation and Its 'New' Women: The Palestinian Women's Movement 1920–1948* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); Orayb Aref Najjar (1992), *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press); Julie M. Peteet (1991), *Gender in Crisis: Women and the Palestinian Resistance Movement* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press). For works on the Palestinian women's role in the First Intifada, see Philippa Strum (1992), *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York, NY: Lawrence Hill Books); Ebba Augustin (ed.) (1993), *Palestinian Women: Identity and Experience* (London: Zed Books); Suha Sabbagh (ed.) (1998), *Palestinian Women of the West Bank and Gaza* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press); Ze'ev Schiff and Ehud Ya'ari (1990), *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising, Israel's Third Front* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster).

9. Orayb Aref Najjar (1992), *Portraits of Palestinian Women* (Salt Lake City, UT: University of Utah Press); Suha Sabbagh (ed.) (1998), *Palestinian Women of the West Bank and Gaza* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press); Philippa Strum (1992), *The Women Are Marching: The Second Sex and the Palestinian Revolution* (New York, NY: Lawrence Hill Books).

10. According to Eileen Kuttab, the work of the women activists during the *intifada* was consumed by social service and therefore was not a radical break from the charitable work of an older generation. See Rita Giacaman and Penny Johnson (1994), 'Searching for strategies: the Palestinian women's movement in the new era', *Middle East Report*, 24(186), p. 24.

11. See Rema Hammami (1997), 'From immodesty to collaboration: Hamas, the women's movement, and national identity in the Intifada', in Joel Beinin and Joe Stork (eds), *Political Islam: Essay From Middle East Report* (London: I.B.Tauris), pp. 194–210.

12. For a detailed discussion of this campaign, see Amal Amireh (2003), 'Between complicity and subversion: body politics in Palestinian national narrative', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 102, pp. 745–70.

13. The Oslo Agreements weakened the Palestinian national movement as a whole and particularly the leftist secular groups, which were caught by surprise, divided by their response and marginalized by Arafat's Palestinian Authority.

14. 'The future of the Palestinian women's movement: continued struggle, new agendas', roundtable organized by the Women's Studies Center of Birzeit University. *News From Within*, XI(4) (April 1995), and the response to the roundtable: 'The Palestinian women's movement: what future?', *News From Within*, XI(7) (July 1995).

15. Again, this professionalization of activists was not limited to the leaders of the women's movement but included other political activists and also academics, who left the local universities for the more lucrative and supposedly politically independent NGO work.

16. 'The future of the Palestinian women's movement: continued struggle, new agendas', roundtable organized by the Women's Studies Center of Birzeit University, *News From Within*, XI(4) (April 1995).

17. See Sherna Berger Gluck (1995), 'Palestinian women: gender politics and nationalism', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 24(3), pp. 5–15.

18. Halima Khaleel Abu Sulb (1997), '*nahwa thaqaqa quanouniya jamahereya*' (Towards a popular legal culture), *al quds*, 26 September.

19. Amal Khreisheh (2000), 'Palestinian women: responsibilities, challenges', *This Week in Palestine*, available at [www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=1638&ed=112](http://www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=1638&ed=112), accessed 30 July 2013; Suhair Azzouni (2000), 'Lobbying for citizenship: the Palestinian case', 8 March, available at <http://info.worldbank.org/etools/docs/library/119089/papers/civil/Azzouni.pdf>, accessed 30 July 2013.

20. For example, while the Women's Model Parliament was instigating a gender war between women activists and the Islamists, the women themselves were largely absent: 'Amazing enough, outside "the political dimension" not many women seem aware of the battles going on to defend and

gain their rights. Many young female students interviewed from al-Quds University, for example, as well as some emancipated women professionals, when questioned, were totally unaware of the existence of such a Parliament and the big fuss about it' (Alessandra Antonelli (1998), 'Women's parliament sparks gender war', *The Palestine Report*, 20 March, p. 5).

21. For a discussion of the PA campaign against NGOs, see Rema Hammami (2000), 'Palestinian NGOs since Oslo: from NGO politics to social movements?', *Middle East Report*, 214 (Spring), pp. 16–19, 27.

22. See Eileen Kuttab (n.d.), 'New challenges for the Palestinian women's movement', *This Week in Palestine*, available at [www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=1635&ed=112](http://www.thisweekinpalestine.com/details.php?id=1635&ed=112), accessed 30 July 2013.

23. In focusing on the discourse through which the women suicide bombers were represented, I am emphasizing that we do not have direct access to these women. This is not to deny their agency. But this agency is heavily mediated by parents, media and politicians. Even the statements the women left behind, whether video or letters, cannot simply be read as personal expressions, since the faction that deployed the woman played a controlling role in these representations. For an article that does not pay enough attention to the mediated nature of the women's own words and images, see Frances Hasso's (2005) 'Discursive and political deployments by/of the 2002 Palestinian women suicide bombers/martyrs', *Feminist Review*, 81, pp. 23–51. A telling sign of the disappearance of Palestinian women from national politics is the book by Laetitia Bucaille (2004) entitled *Growing Up Palestinian: Israeli Occupation and the Intifada Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press). The author includes only men as representatives of this generation of the al-Aqsa Intifada. Also see Eileen Kuttab and Penny Johnson (2001), 'Where have all the women (and men) gone? Reflections on gender and the second Palestinian Intifada', *Feminist Review*, 69, pp. 21–43.

24. Quoted in Ismail Abel Latif al Ashquar and Mo'men Mohammad Bseeso (2004), *alamar'a alfalasteeneyah: fee da'erat alistihdaf alsahyouni* (The Palestinian Woman: A Zionist Target) (almarkez alarabi lilbuhouth waldirasat).

25. *alsha'ab* (Egypt), 1 February 2002, quoted in Memri (The Middle East Media Research Institute) (2002), 'Wafa Idris: the celebration of the first Palestinian suicide bomber', 13 February, Inquiry & Analysis Series Report No. 84, available at [www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/610.htm#\\_edn1](http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/610.htm#_edn1), accessed 30 July 2013.

26. al Ashquar and Bseeso, *alamar'a alfalasteeneyah*.

27. Arnon Regular (2004), 'Mother of two becomes first female suicide bomber for Hamas', *Haaretz*, 16 January.

28. al Ashquar and Bseeso, *alamar'a alfalasteeneyah*, p. 157 (my translation).

29. For a discussion of the work of these groups, see Amal Amireh (2010), 'Afterword' in 'Queer Politics and the Question of Palestine/Israel', a special issue of *Gay and Lesbian Quarterly*, edited by Gil Hochberg, 16, pp. 635–47.

## CHAPTER 18

# Indigenizing Feminist Knowledge: Palestinian Feminist Thought Between the Physics of International Power and the Theology of Racist 'Security'\*

*Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian\*\**

### **Introduction**

Palestinian women have suffered the consequences of the *nakba*, of exile and dispersal, for over 60 years, and today find themselves victims of a historic injustice that has deprived them of a country all their own, distorted the geography of their physical space, destabilized their economic and productive potential, and put large obstacles on the path of their quest for a stable social life that would allow them to develop in security. It has forced them to play political and gender roles that require them to deal with and adapt to an international immoral duplicity which, on the one hand, sanctions continuing criminal and repressive measures against them, and, on the other, prevents them from challenging the status quo.

A diligent review of the conditions under which women in refugee camps and host countries live, including the historic land of Palestine itself, shows the manner in which Palestinian women deal with exile and loss, with the destruction of their country and homes, and with the impact all this has had on their status as women.

The major challenge that has faced Palestinian women is the fact that they are ignored by the international community, which has acquiesced in their uprooting and exile. This has upset the internal social balance of



power because the confrontation has revolved around quotidian matters for more than 60 years.

The assumption underlying this chapter is that it is impossible to understand Palestinian feminist thought without listening to the voices and experience of Palestinian women, each in her own milieu, and seeing the *nakba* as the analytical point of departure and the moral cornerstone of feminist theorizing. We cannot practise feminist activism without first pondering the complexities of the power struggles evolving in the shadow of geographic, political, economic and intellectual hegemony, and without analysing the repressive policies that have separated Palestinian women from their families and communities, and tirelessly work to reinforce and reproduce internal patriarchal authority. It is also impossible to understand the challenge posed by the dynamics of power, and the way it behaves locally, regionally and internationally, without proposing an Arab Palestinian feminist theory that combats current notions and breaks down condescending, culturally pretentious, Orientalist and colonial concepts.

Theorizing on Palestinian feminist activism requires that we listen to the suffering and experience of Palestinian women, that we uncover and analyse the tangible elements of the practices associated with the so-called 'physics of power' and theology of Israeli security, both of which terms I will try to explain in this study. These practices, which intensify in tandem with the international institutionalization of amnesia regarding the rights of Palestinian men and women, have placed the Palestinian feminist battle within the historical and geographic fear-mongering policies towards the Palestinians and their cause. To understand the challenge ensuing from this battle, I find it necessary to start with my own personal fight as a woman and a researcher. I was born in the city of Haifa, in my homeland, as a member of a minority living on its own stolen land on which I had no place because the Jewish state decided it should be so. I grew up in a state whose object was to eliminate and silence me, and I was reared in a society trying to lick its wounds while constantly living the pain of physical, intellectual and emotional dispersal. I lived in a state that decided to hide the historic injustice it inflicted on my compatriots, both men and women. Today, I live in the old city of Jerusalem, where I have been living for the past 25 years, a life dominated by daily home demolitions, uprooting of entire families and human beings robbed of their future. All this pain takes place in full view of the world and in front of television cameras and the internet, which

also transmit directly, and on the air, images of Palestinians being killed in Gaza, Jenin, Nablus, Hebron, Jerusalem and Nazareth. The world watches the tragedy unfold, then forgets – or at least pretends to forget.

My place as a woman, a researcher and a feminist Palestinian activist living in Jerusalem, and walking every day alongside my fellow Jerusalemites on the winding Via Dolorosa, compels me to insist on the need to indigenize critical knowledge, that would allow us to challenge the dominant epistemological trends and theories, and come up with a new, resistance-based knowledge.

To this end, I have chosen to address three specific points. First, I would like us to listen to the voices of some Palestinian women from occupied Jerusalem, before moving on to the physics of power and the theology of security. I shall end with a conclusion that calls for a discussion on the configuration of feminist, resistance-based thought.

## **Indigenizing knowledge**

I told you before that I hate the old city; a girl's life there is not at all comfortable. In my case, at least, my parents trust me and I usually go in and out as I please, but I don't stay out late because the big problem in the old city comes when I return home. The streets are poorly lit and the Jews' cameras are everywhere; people in this area are afraid of each other, of the dope addicts and of the army, which means that it is impossible to feel safe. The least I can say is that when I return home from university, I do not feel as if I am coming back home to rest, but as if I am entering a prison or an airport where you are required to produce proof of identity at the door, be searched and prove that your address is indeed inside the city before you are allowed in. The police monitor our every step: for example, our neighbours from the X family have a house here and another outside the old city, both of which are in bad shape and unliveable. They left, moved to the other house while the Jerusalem house was being renovated, but when they came back to check on it they found that the Jews had brought their things and were living in it. They went to court and the Jews said that the house had been sold to them, while the Xs said no. The Jews are still there... they are there in front of us day and night, and our fear of them makes us weak in the knees.

(Shaima', aged 23, the Old City, Jerusalem, August 2009)

Our neighbour was pregnant but lost the baby from too much pain and humiliation... and now my poor sister-in-law is about to deliver... Can you imagine the condition she is in? She is afraid of the Jews and so angry; she is afraid of giving birth; she is afraid of leaving the house lest the Jews mistreat and humiliate us; she worries about how she will be treated in a Jewish hospital... worried about this and that – she said that just yesterday.

(Samar, aged 21, the Old City, August 2009)

When they demolished the house, I did not only feel that I had lost my home, but also my abilities. I lost the ability to protect and care for my children; I lost the ability to develop and improve myself; even small things, like waking up when I want to, making myself a cup of coffee when I feel like it, playing with my children whenever I wish, talking to my husband any time and in any manner I please – all that is gone. My home is gone and my abilities are gone.

(Fadwa, aged 33, Jerusalem, May 2007)

Listening to the voices of Palestinian women such as Shaima', Samar and Fadwa, plagued day in and day out by fear and anxiety, imposes on us the need to develop a feminist theory capable of dismantling the tools of authority wielded by the politically and economically powerful. This theory should also be able to deconstruct the infrastructure of skills that terrorizes Palestinian women and puts them under constant surveillance, and to analyse the political, social and psychological effects of surveillance and eavesdropping tools. It should be able to analyse how a world of symbols and new rituals is built:

They gave us a hard time even when we wanted to bury my father; they forbade my brother and sister to attend the funeral. Even his brothers could not bid him farewell. My youngest uncle snuck in to the funeral without a permit, and instead of crying over my dead father, we cried over our miserable lot. My grandfather said: 'This cheek has become used to being slapped... and we Palestinians have been slapped continuously for a long time now.' Since the day of my father's death my mother has often been sick, and is going blind from acute diabetes and too many tears. Since that day, my life has completely changed. I cannot finish my studies or leave the house. When we buried my father, a part of me was buried with him; it would have been better had they really buried me with him.

(Maisa, aged 26, June 2009)

The proposed feminist theorizing takes us to where Palestinian history and its geography began, to being born under a system of state terrorism, to burials and loss under occupation, as Maisa, her mother and family have experienced it, and to the loss of hope, as Fadwa described it.

These women's voices take us back to 1948 and the *nakba*, still with us after all these years thanks to the absence of security, repeated blows to the Palestinian social fabric, home demolitions, the need for permits – not always granted and not at all guaranteed, but hostage to a long list of impossible conditions – to bury the dead, to attend a funeral, and in general to conduct one's life. Last but not least, the *nakba* is still with us thanks to the bypass roads, and having to drive through areas deemed 'suspicious' by the occupiers.

In an article entitled ‘Necropolitics’ (the motives, ideas and practices associated with the economies of death), Achilles Mbembe says ‘that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die’.<sup>1</sup> He also writes that ‘contemporary forms of subjugation of life to the power of death (necropolitics) profoundly reconfigure relations among resistance, sacrifice, and terror’. In her testimony above, Maisa has shown us how sovereignty can be exercised by keeping even death under surveillance. Controlling the means of bidding her father farewell, controlling his burial, reconfigures the hegemonic power’s sovereignty and strengthens its control. We could use Mbembe’s analysis, in this theoretical context, to uncover the various mechanisms of power applied daily through a variety of repressive measures that have become tools of control over life and death, choking the life out of an entire society, especially its women, who bear the brunt of this daily repression.

To indigenize feminist knowledge, we have to use the words of Maisa, who lives her own death, and sees herself as one of the living-dead, as our point of departure towards deconstructing the policies that have turned women’s lives into the embodiment of death, and study the reasons behind the immoral international blindness to the Palestinian cause. The tightly woven fabric of overlapping historic, geographic, psychological and physical violence perpetrated against women forces them to configure intricate forms of resistance. Based on that, the proposed theory allows us to look at the various means of resistance employed by women.

In a previous research project on the demolition of Palestinian women’s homes, I uncovered a new language of feminist resistance, and a revolutionary language that challenges the language of ‘human rights’ coined to serve, in many cases, the interests of the hegemonic power. The Palestinian woman’s challenge to the racially motivated demolition of homes, before, during and after the act of demolition, comes in the shape of her daily resistance to this savage measure: she resists it with her body to stop it from happening; with her voice, her screams and her silence in the face of the occupier’s bulldozers; through her tireless efforts to care for her family and to create a new home; and through her resistance to the militarization of her living space by enrolling in schools and academic institutions. This multifaceted challenge helped coin a feminist language of

resistance ‘made in Palestine’, a language based on local morality and criteria.

Based on this, any feminist theorizing should necessarily admit that Palestinians, both men and women, are indeed the victims of necropolitics, despite their steadfastness and resistance against it. And amidst this form of necropolitics, women stand strong with their intellect, bodies, nationality and feminism at roadblocks and border posts; they suffer death and loss without ever ceasing to give new life, hold onto it dearly or embrace it.

The Palestinian feminist theory that I am proposing is located in difficult terrain. It must not only refuse the imperialism and colonialism of the Zionist movement, and some of the shameful official Arab neo-imperial positions, including the principle of ‘Land for Peace’, but must also confront academic theories based on individualist analysis and orientalist tendencies that examine violence against women as a phenomenon removed from its context by falsifying reality and distorting history.

This falsification poses a series of challenges to feminist thought and activism. It marginalizes the repressive history, the violent living conditions and the infrastructures of occupation, as well as the refugee issue, including the right of return, through its strategies of economic control over issues of life and death (i.e. necropolitics). To understand exactly what obliterating the voices of Samar, Shaima’ and Fadwa means, I will now address the physics of power.

## **The physics of power**

By looking at the impact of the strategies of those who wield power over the political and economic lives of Palestinians, we arrive at the conclusion that there is a totalitarian tendency that aims not only at turning the Arab–Palestinian woman into an object, but also at reproducing her marginalization by controlling not only every moment of her day but also her body and her entire life.

To understand the meaning of the physics of power (or what Roy calls the physics of authority),<sup>2</sup> we should diligently study the power game’s characteristics and strategies, as well as the past and present sources of power that impacted Palestinian feminist theorizing, and still do. The word physics, drawn from the Greek word meaning the science of nature, is the study of matter and its movement through time and space. Using the term

‘physics of power’, as we do in this chapter, requires the ability to use analytical and experimental methods (including history, geography, economics, politics and gender) in order to understand and explain the Palestinians’ position vis-à-vis the challenges, obstacles, problems and laws that govern, impact or are impacted by the power game that is politics, from international politics to women’s daily lives. It also requires that we understand historic landmark events, caused by successive waves of repression, and their fallout in terms of weakening or strengthening the position of women and feminist activists in local society.

Analysing the physics of power helps us understand the laws and powers behind daily Palestinian feminist activism. In other words, it helps us to explain what happens on a daily basis at home, in the family, at academic institutions, at the workplace and in the political arena, and to link this to the general context. It also helps understand the alliances based on identity and common interests, in order to monitor areas of intense and/or sporadic activity in different forms of Palestinian feminist resistance.

To understand female education rates, for example, we have to study the motives for and impediments to education, such as the available budgets, and the development of fields of study that could make it easier for women to go to university or join the labour market. Moreover, if we want to analyse the rate at which young girls marry, we should not simply look at the typical obstacles presented by a male-dominated society, but should examine prevailing social conditions under occupation, such as feeling physically safe when moving around, finding means to protect oneself when threatened, ensuring the daily livelihood of one’s family, paying school fees, and other daily functions that the colonial power controls in order to limit and obstruct the potential of those under its hegemony. To apply the term *early school exit* to the small number of girls enrolled at schools in villages not recognized by the state in 1948 Palestine, or on lands occupied in 1967, is wrong, an un-indigenized judgement that has nothing to do with critical feminism. It is a judgement that fails to understand that it is the physics of power, the militarization and containment of the area, that deprives girls of their right to education.

Our analysis of the physics of power, which is linked to efforts by Palestinian feminists to stand in the face of policies that seek to incapacitate and sideline them, should rely on a system that deconstructs and analyses the infrastructure of repression and the way it operates, and develop critical

theories on all aspects of the physics of power. Moreover, to be able to read the strategic map showing how this type of physics operates and uses technology requires a deep understanding of how international power moves, and the impact of different forces on relevant issues, like land occupation, capital ownership and the network of colonial interests, and how this affects Palestinian men and women, including the realization of what it means for a society to be forced to water down its pain, accept it or even deny its existence. The establishment of the Jewish state on the ruins of Palestine through ethnic cleansing and the use of various methods of repression, such as military rule, discriminatory laws that ensure that the state remains Jewish in character and an ideology that erases the potential for any Palestinian entity, reflects itself in the reproduction and reconstruction of Palestinian patriarchal thought, and the practices associated with it.

When analysing the repercussions of the *nakba* over a period of more than 60 years, taking into account the stifled voices calling for the right of return and ending the Palestinian diaspora, the forced silence of the original inhabitants and the occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip through a wave of violence that has not yet ended, we should try to understand the impact that successive shocks have had on the collective self-image, and on gender politics.

Considering the Palestinian individual as a constant security threat to Israel, a threat that should be brought under control or put in a cage (the racist separation wall and the roadblocks, both visible and unseen), is the racist lie par excellence. It is so because it spawned policies of occupation and Judaization of land and place that has narrowed the living space of Palestinians, and turned it into prisons and geographical cages under the Jewish state's control. This state can do whatever it wills, thanks to the physics of power that determine the place, time and movement of the Palestinians and their chosen path. Understanding the physics of power requires knowing its strategy and how it works. Here arises the need for a feminist resistance-based thought capable of standing up to the racist *theology of security* to come into play, and for the need to empower the Arab and Palestinian feminist struggle to enable it to deconstruct the dominant epistemology, and to propose new research concepts, tools and methods that help create a resistance-based feminist thought capable of challenging different manifestations of masculine power.

As I propose it in this chapter, the physics of power also means understanding the importance of solidarity with those who have no power, and I would like to mention here the failure of international law, world feminism and Israeli feminism in this respect. The focal point of our critical research is to analyse in depth the daily price Palestinians pay, the total obliteration of the concept of justice, the policies of power, the impact of war and of ignoring its crimes (Deir Yassin, Kafr Kasseem, Tantoura, Gaza and so on endlessly), and the effect all this has had on the physics of power, both internationally and locally, and on the social infrastructure and patriarchal authority. In my opinion, without understanding the hegemonic world empire and all that relates to it, such as globalization, capitalism and neo-colonialism, and without a diligent examination of the impact all this has on Arab and Palestinian social and political infrastructure, it is impossible to build a critical feminist theory or to create critical feminist practices tied to it. Deconstructing the internationally promoted, superficial and culturally pretentious ideologies is the other face of studying daily life amidst the struggle for survival, and the defence of one's land and identity.

## **The theology of Israeli security**

Over and above the need to understand, delineate and deconstruct the physics of power's elements, it is necessary to study the way the fear mongers operate via what I call the *theology of security*, which strengthens Israeli security by producing commercial tenders to 'protect' the world from 'terrorists'. The theology of security operates on the basis of successive and well-coordinated measures and practices executed by political and bureaucratic power-brokers, economy tsars and barons of military industry.

The theology of security is like a religion; it has its own rituals, conditions and practices, and nourishes itself by attracting those who hold sway over matters usually surprising and difficult to predict. It therefore relies on the 'unexpected' and the 'obscure' that require immediate or potential interventions to prevent the de-stabilization of the balance of power. The rituals of immediate intervention to re-establish the balance of power are the same rituals that reproduce this theology and this security-based religion. These are also the rituals that configure punitive and disciplinary mechanisms in the name of security, using all the elements of



power at their disposal, such as technology, unconstitutional and inhumane laws, control systems, legislated violence (the issue of torture and the ‘war on terror’), threats to citizens and their treatment, as objects by uprooting them from their land and turning them into refugees.

In her book, *The Shock Doctrine* (2009), Naomi Klein describes how the Israeli economy is booming by encouraging war, and increasing disaster areas: ‘We would not be exaggerating if we say that the economic sector of the war on terror saved Israel’s economy just as disaster capitalism rescued the international stock market’.<sup>3</sup>

Turning to the power of Israeli security companies, Klein writes:

In 2006 Israel exported a record \$3.4 billion (compared to \$1.6 billion in 1992) in defence products. That makes Israel the fourth-largest arms dealer in the world, overtaking Britain. Israel has more stocks listed on Nasdaq exchange – most security related – than China and India combined. And today its technological sector, principally based in security products, makes up 60% of all its exports.<sup>4</sup>

Investment in Israel’s permanent violence has boosted its economic-political growth, and the Zionist lobby’s ongoing efforts in support of Israel and its colonial interests has helped establish an industry based on fear of others, described as *terrorists*, to build a new theology, the theology of Israeli security.

This theology has promoted Israel’s role as the commercial and profit-making hub of the ‘disaster capitalism complex’, and as an example of steadfastness in the face of a sea of enemies. It helped raise the level of bloody violence against the Palestinians and destroyed their economy, the rate of poverty among them having reached 70 per cent. It produced a necropolitics system based on the economy of life and death: death to the Palestinians and life to the Israelis and the Americans who hold all the power. Understanding this security theology’s logic of inevitability, that portrays those who have the power and the movers and shakers of its physics as being under threat, and the impact this has on women, helps us understand the nature of the measures that spawned new methods of violence against women, and rebuilt the old repressive mechanisms.

## Conclusion

The Palestinian feminism I propose in this chapter underlines the importance of expanding and indigenizing the analytical-critical angle, to

understand better the political-economic context that has turned human beings into commodities in the hands of the hegemonic power, and that has turned Western and Israeli democratic principles into tools of ethnic cleansing to control and disperse Palestinian families, and hurt them socially and psycho-logically. Then come those who call for opening new markets to new societies, and tell Palestinian women the story of freedom, equality and non-violence, robbing them of their pain and marketing their bodies as commodities, whether dead or alive, in the interests of the hegemonic power!

Understanding the physics of power requires that we first dismantle the institutionalized moral defeat of world feminism, and challenge the international, regional and local amnesia concealing the Palestinians' right to live. It also requires that we challenge the side that bears the main responsibility for the institutionalization of immorality and injustice (i.e. Zionist ideology).

However, our analysis should not hide the role that Arab and Palestinian weakness has played in destabilizing the balance of power, a fact that helped Israel impose its military superiority on the daily lives of women, and forced them to configure resistance strategies for every step they take.

On the other hand, the international dimension of the physics of power has sanctioned the concepts of 'Israeli security' and preventive war, and issued moral *fatwas* that exonerate Israel of crimes committed in defence of its security and condone the reinforcement of the fear industry. This is where the role of the anti-peace and anti-Islam wave comes into play, a wave that equates the Palestinian struggle with terrorism in order to delegitimize its cause.

Feminism can play a historic role in resisting repression and violence. This is why it is important to insist on the right of Palestinian feminism to resist, and this is not negotiable. We should counter unfair and criminal policies that starve the stomach and the intellect by indigenizing Palestinian feminist knowledge. We should also deconstruct the economies of language, the language of political economy and the discourses of hegemonic power and policies, and produce an alternative knowledge and a counter-reaction capable of building a feminist strategy for resistance.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Arab Center For Applied Social Research, Palestine.

1. Achilles Mbebe (2003), 'Necropolitics', *Public Culture*, 15, pp. 11–40.
2. Arundhati Roy (2004), *The Check-book and the Cruise Missile: Conversations with Arundhati Roy: Interviews by David Barsamian* (Cambridge: South End Press).
3. Naomi Klein (2009), *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism*, Arabic translation by Nadine Khoury and Fouad Zuaiter (*sharikat almatbou'at li'l tawzi' w 'alnashr*), p. 604.
4. Ibid.

## Further reading

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, Nadera (2005), 'Counter-spaces as resistance in conflict zones: Palestinian women recreating a home', *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, 17(3), pp. 109–41.

## CHAPTER 19

### The Developing Role of Colonial Feminists in Iraq<sup>1\*</sup>

*Haifa Zangana\*\**

This study traces the gradual expansion of feminist activities linked to the American occupation of Iraq in the wake of the 2003 invasion. It follows the different stages and developments of the political process that relies on the services rendered by feminists to the American bases.

It addresses the way these feminist organizations were established, the nature of their activities, which eventually became part and parcel of the occupation, and how their political agendas were formed, whether indirectly, as it was in the beginning, or directly, as partners in the American military establishment's fight against the 'insurgency' and 'terrorism'. I aim to show the impact all this has had on the nature of these organizations' work and, ultimately, on the feminist movement as a whole.

#### **Establishment, funding and aims prior to the invasion**

The main organizations of what we know today as Iraqi civil society were established in the United States and Great Britain in the early 1990s. The fact that they were established outside Iraq is in itself a violation of the rules of the organic development of civil society, since this beginning was directly linked to the American foreign policy agenda, and to the sources of funding. This link delineated the basic nature and activities of these organizations and, consequently, the way Iraqi society perceives them.

The establishment of the Iraq Foundation in Washington, in 1991, and its declared objectives, have served as examples to all the other organizations. According to its website, the Foundation's mission is to 'promote democracy, human rights and civil society in Iraq',<sup>2</sup> a statement that would

be repeated, in one way or another, by the majority of Iraqi civil society organizations, including the feminist ones, whether inside or outside Iraq. This was soon followed by the establishment of the American-Islamic Congress (AIC)<sup>3</sup> and, with Congress' approval, the establishment of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq (CLI)<sup>4</sup> and the allocation of a budget for it. After that, the number of such organizations mushroomed.

As for women's organizations, the American administration, and, to a lesser degree, the British government, showed a sudden interest in establishing Iraqi feminist organizations out of London and Washington, once they realized during the preparation stage of the invasion the publicity potential of this hitherto 'marginalized and unheard' voice. The Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), a well-known Zionist organization that takes pride in supporting the racist separation wall in Palestine, raised the alert about the need to close this gap, stating on its website:<sup>5</sup>

When President Bush was thinking of intervening in Iraq, FDD realized that important voices were absent from the debate – the voices of Iraqis with first-hand experience of Saddam Hussein's regime of tyranny, savagery and extermination. The FDD collected a number of Iraqi women who could help the Americans understand what was happening in Iraq – and what the dangers were there.<sup>6</sup>

The American administration soon became aware of the omission and, for the purposes of publicity, adopted a number of quick measures to remedy the absence of this useful media essential.<sup>7</sup>

One could clearly notice the increase in the use of terms like 'the suffering of Iraqi women', their 'liberation' and 'rights' in the discourse of White House officials, as the invasion date approached. This was due to the administration's failure to garner the public's support, as it had hoped it would, after its two initial excuses for going to war collapsed (i.e. the presence of weapons of mass destruction and the relationship between Saddam Hussein's regime and al-Qaeda). The Center for Public Integrity and the Fund for Independence in Journalism monitored the statements of American officials on Iraq's weapons of mass destruction, and found that on 532 different occasions, eight official agencies gave at least 935 false statements on the Iraqi weapons issue as well as the links to al-Qaeda. They concluded that the cumulative effect of these statements – amplified by thousands of news items and broadcasts – effectively galvanized public opinion and, in the process, led the nation to war under decidedly false

pretences.<sup>8</sup> It is worth mentioning in this context that, although some of the oft-repeated stories of the suffering of Iraqi women broadcast in the media by the American Administration are credible, no independent research has been undertaken to establish their veracity. One can only go back to what British parliamentarian Ann Clwyd, the British prime minister's Special Envoy on Human Rights in Iraq, said on the eve of Parliament's vote on joining the American invasion of Iraq. Her effective intervention in Parliament on 18 March 2003, as well as an article by her published in *The Times* on the same day, helped move a number of parliamentarians to vote in favour of the invasion. In *The Times* article she wrote of a gigantic shredder in the possession of Saddam Hussein, which was used by his son Qusay to shred the bodies of Iraqi men.<sup>9</sup> The British press later on checked whether such a machine indeed existed and found that its existence was a ploy to mislead public opinion,<sup>10</sup> since no trace of it was ever found in Iraq. From then on the shredder lie was linked to Ann Clwyd's name, despite her attempts to justify herself by blaming the press for misunderstanding the gist of her account, as well as providing an 'Iraqi witness' who had confirmed its veracity.

In February 2003, the FDD,<sup>11</sup> with funding from the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq, brought together 50 American and British women of Iraqi origin to establish 'Women for a Free Iraq' (WFFI). The members of this group eventually helped form several feminist organizations under occupation, which made WFFI a nucleus for colonial feminists who chose to work, whether directly or indirectly, with the colonizer. The Bush administration enthusiastically welcomed the WFFI, marking the second time, after Afghanistan, in recent history that one country used the issue of women's liberation to justify its invasion of another.

To clarify the link between these newly formed feminist organizations and the occupier's foreign policy agenda, it is worth mentioning that the American administration's policy and, to a lesser extent, that of the European donor countries, towards non-governmental organizations, including women's groups, changed significantly following the events of 11 September 2001. The scope of these organizations' ability to choose their activities to suit their country's and their society's needs, and to acquire funding, became much more limited, if it did not end altogether. The spirit of the 'war on terror' dominated, and non-governmental organizations and contractors came to be seen as tools of the American administration, and aid

agencies had to declare their identity as recipients of American funds to further Washington's political and military objectives.<sup>12</sup>

## **The organizations in the post-invasion period**

After the invasion of Iraq, a number of 'non-governmental' organizations founded with foreign funding and a foreign political agenda outside Iraq, prior to the invasion, came back to the country. The most important of these were WFFI, the Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq (WAFDI), the Iraq Institute for Strategic Studies (IIST) and the American-Islamic Congress.

These organizations branched out inside Iraq mostly in tandem with political developments on the ground, and changed their activities in line with changes in American policy made to fit neo-colonial requirements. It also coincided with the launch of new American military initiatives in civil society that required work and cooperation directly with Iraqi women. These colonial feminists were well rewarded after the invasion: they were appointed to ministerial and governmental positions in successive occupation governments, or granted financial assistance to establish new organizations. Other women, who gradually adapted to the occupation, soon joined them.

Prior to the occupation, non-governmental organizations were subject to Law No. 13 of 2000, which regulated their activities. However, when Paul Bremer took over as the US Administrator in Iraq, he changed 100 laws including NGO Law No. 13 in violation of several Geneva Conventions forbidding the occupying power from changing local laws and structures. In November 2003, Bremer issued Order No. 45 which pertained to the registration of non-governmental organizations; it aimed at 'the need to take measures to coordinate their activities... to ensure the security of the Iraqi people and prevent the misuse of non-governmental organizations for fraudulent or illegal purposes'. This order is still in effect. The mission of the leading women's organizations focuses on training leaders for a democratic Iraq, and on empowering and protecting women against the violence of male society, in addition to charity campaigns, literacy and sewing classes, and handicrafts.<sup>13</sup>

The activities of these organizations, however, lack credibility due to the conditions attached to their funding. It is well known that sources that fund civil society impose conditions on how their grant money is spent; the

organizations under discussion have always relied on direct funding from various governments, above all the occupying power, the United States of America, with its unambiguous colonial policy not in line with the Iraqi people's hopes and aspirations. Moreover, the insistence of the funders that recipient organizations openly declare their sources of funding<sup>14</sup> for publicity purposes has also had a negative impact on these organizations. It has made them appear to be tools in the occupier's hands, and a means of implementing those strategic policies that aim at destroying Iraq's social infrastructure, and forcefully replacing it with a civil society fashioned to serve foreign interests. From the time they were still based outside Iraq, and even after moving back, these organizations' funding sources were, for the most part, the American State Department, USAID, the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), the International Republican Institute (IRI), the National Democratic Institute (NDI), the Independent Women's Forum (IWF), the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq.

Inside Iraq, however, the non-governmental organizations' budget did not exceed a few million US dollars, distributed (sometimes in cash amounts) to those seeking to establish NGOs without close scrutiny. This is not a new phenomenon for the American administration; it did the same in Eastern Europe after the fall of Communism.<sup>15</sup> According to Paul Bremer, on 30 June 2004, on the eve of the handover of power to the interim government of Iyad Allawi, the sum of US\$750 million from the American and Iraqi budgets was allocated for this very purpose, most of which was spent on conferences, mostly outside Iraq, and on training a number of chosen women in democratic leadership skills. According to a fact sheet issued by the Office of the Senior Coordinator for International Women's Issues on 22 June 2005, 'the United States allocated nearly half a billion dollars to support democracy-building programs in Iraq – including projects that specifically help women with democratic organization and advocacy'.<sup>16</sup>

It is obvious that these funds are restricted to a selected number of organizations and institutions that, with time, have learned which individuals or organizations to nominate for grants, and which to prevent from enjoying the privilege. They also gained expertise in the domain of writing proposals and elaborating projects that please the donors and fit well within their objectives.



## **The agenda of the political process and of women's activities**

The agenda of the American political process has gone through several stages since 2003. According to UN Resolution No. 1483 in 2003, these include handing over sovereignty (30 June 2004), drafting a constitution and voting on it, and holding general and municipal elections. It is worth noting here that alongside this agenda, widely publicized in the Arab world and internationally, a parallel reality, absent from the news media, manifested itself in the escalating Iraqi national resistance movement against the occupation, and the serious losses the latter incurred as a result. It is a reality worth researching at a later date to ascertain the impact of this resistance on the women's movement in general, and on the colonial feminists in particular.

The political agenda impacted the colonial feminists' activities in six different ways:

1. It marketed 'democracy' through a series of leadership training workshops held mostly outside Iraq, without effecting any real change in the quality of women's leadership, and without forging a wider, popular feminist support base among Iraqi women.<sup>17</sup>
2. It justified the occupation government's policies, as well as those of the military occupation, by repeatedly and publicly blaming 'terrorism', the 'forces of darkness' and the 'Islamists' for the violence, and exonerating the occupation of any legal or human responsibility by remaining silent about crimes committed by mercenaries and members of the 'multinational force', even when there was clear evidence, including eyewitness accounts, to substantiate them. These crimes included raping and killing women, breaking into and entering people's homes, and arresting women as hostages until the family hands over male members to the occupation authorities.<sup>18</sup>
3. Publicity campaigns were launched in the United States touting the 'successes of liberation and the construction of a new Iraq', and visits to American military bases to thank the troops were publicized. To coincide with the 2004 American presidential elections, the 'Iraq–America Freedom Alliance' and the Foundation for the Defense of

Democracies organized lecture tours for 12 Iraqi women leaders, culminating in photo opportunities with President George W. Bush.<sup>19</sup>

4. The funding of feminist activities in Iraq centred on activities that support the political process through, for example, a series of campaigns immediately preceding the general and municipal elections, which encouraged the formation of several phantom women's organizations. Dr Mamu Farhan Othman, Iraqi minister of state for civil society, said that there were some 2,000 women's organizations receiving funding from donor countries without any merit.<sup>20</sup>
5. It helped women hone their ability to market the occupier's stereotypical message on women's issues to attract foreign support, whether for material or publicity purposes, as well as to form new secondary organizations that conform to what donor agencies would like to hear about 'gender' and 'women's empowerment'. Tanya Clay of the FDD, and one of the founders of Women for a Free Iraq, stresses the need to seek foreign funding for Iraqi women's issues.<sup>21</sup> It led to the appointment of a number of colonial feminists to parliament based on what we might call sharing the shares system (i.e. the women's quota, as well as the sectarian and ethnic quotas that govern the entire political process). This is how the halls of parliament, situated in the Green Zone of Baghdad, became a space for political upmanship and publicity stunts, even as a gap was growing between what the women parliamentarians were saying and the real condition of Iraqi women. This was especially true once the number of Iraqi widows reached the 1 million figure, and the number of orphans 5 million, and bearing in mind the fact that Iraqi women today lack the most basic of life's necessities, such as education, health and human dignity. Moreover, at a time when parliamentarians marketed the occupation by claiming it was combating international terrorism and the absence of security in Iraq, women parliamentarians like Safia al-Suhail not only seconded these claims, but also spread stories about the gender discrimination and 'male domination' that al-Suhail had faced.<sup>22</sup> Although no one can deny the importance of the human perspective in ending discrimination against women all over the world, the performance of parliamentary feminists has shown that their role has actually stripped the phrases 'women's rights' and 'democracy' of their true meaning, which Iraqi women have fought so long to achieve.

## **‘Normalization’ as a ploy to expand the number of women’s organizations in the neo-colonial era**

The Status of Forces Agreement and the Strategic Framework Agreement were signed between the American occupation and the fourth Iraqi occupation government on 17 November 2008, to ‘normalize Iraqi-American relations in various political, diplomatic, economic and cultural domains’. The first sentence states: ‘Both agreements protect U.S. interests in the Middle East.’<sup>23</sup>

If we take President Obama at his word concerning the withdrawal of American forces in Iraq, leaving some 50,000 as advisors and trainers, then the next few years should make the features of neo-colonialism clearer. As far as women’s activities are concerned, certain aspects of these features are already becoming clear, given the public relations value especially of women’s issues to the colonial power. In 2006–7 a new kind of feminist emerged who depends for her existence and security directly on the American occupation and its military machine, rather than on the murky funding system we have seen in the past. These women fear that their work would come to an end if the American forces do indeed withdraw from the country. In a conference entitled ‘The Future of Women-Owned Businesses’, Azza Humadi, programme manager of the ‘Women’s Advocacy Initiative’, said that ‘the title means we have ended an era, and are entering a new one’, and expressed concern that the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq would certainly affect her programme.<sup>24</sup>

The importance of studying women’s programmes that fall within the framework of the American military establishment lies in the fact that they could indicate the type of activities women will be encouraged to do in the future, not only in Iraq but in the entire Arab region. This type of encouragement is part of the overall change in the activities of America’s military imperialism in the region, and an indicator of its social aims, and normalization, which are part of General Petraeus’ ‘counter-insurgency’ plan in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Azza Humadi says that she would be glad to lend her support to Iraqi businesswomen, and urged those in charge to help all Iraqi women, since they make up half of society.<sup>25</sup>

The ‘Women’s Advocacy Initiative’, or the ‘Women’s Program’, an initiative by the Gulf Region Division, US Army Corps of Engineers in

Iraq, was launched in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2005 and operated by the American Stanley Baker Hill Company under contract to the Gulf Region Division. The company works at attracting Iraqi businesswomen with the help of an Iraqi American woman by the name of Azza Khalil Humadi, an employee of the Iowa-based company. The company signed a US\$1.2 billion contract with the American Department of Defense (the Pentagon) to provide construction management services in Iraq, including military installations. It is the sector most known for its corruption, whether by the American contracted companies or local contractors.<sup>26</sup> Azza Humadi concentrated her efforts on attracting Iraqi businesswomen and training them to work with the occupation forces.

In light of the importance the occupation lends to issues pertaining to Iraqi women, special attention was focused on 5 May 2009 on the activities of Iraqi businesswomen. It was the first time that the I-BIZ Programme was mentioned, the name being an acronym for the Iraqi-Based Industrial Zone – a misleading title, since it actually indicates specific locations inside the American bases where, according to the Programme's website, Iraqi companies under contract to the American occupation forces can implement their contracts. Iraqi companies are usually located inside the camp's perimeter, close to the entrance gate and in proximity to the external barbed wire, meaning that their presence is tantamount to a security belt around the base, to protect it from attacks by the resistance, not to mention the obvious advantage of having Iraqi contractors and labourers on base, an important source of information for the occupation. I-BIZ's website informs us that 'the program will be given use of a piece of land on which to establish a variety of businesses, in a secure area, to provide services and products to the Coalition Forces'.<sup>27</sup> This message contradicts statements made by American military personnel and politicians at press conferences, in which they introduced the programme as an 'important step' towards 'promoting the Iraqi economy' and 'empowering women'. In fact, the Programme is part of General Petraeus' 'Iraq First' initiative, designed to combat 'the insurgency' by granting a number of American military contracts to Iraqi companies and workers, in order to fulfil American military requirements. The Programme is reminiscent of the Zionist policy of using Palestinian labour to build Jewish settlements.

Kellogg Brown and Root, the largest contracting company with the American military given the almost \$11 billion worth of contracts it signed

with the Pentagon, and a company known for corruption and for failing to fulfil its contracts, is involved in the ‘Women’s Advocacy Initiative’ as well.<sup>28</sup>

Some say that Azza Humadi and the businesswomen working with her<sup>29</sup> are mere technocrats and therefore have nothing to do with politics, but are simply working to advance the Iraqi economy. However, being a technocrat does not mean losing the ability to distinguish the military forces that occupy your country, or their crimes and thefts, and their patronage of what is, according to Transparency International, one of the most corrupt governments in the world.<sup>30</sup> And if the Initiative is all about reviving the collapsed Iraqi economy, then where are the calls for holding the occupation accountable and punishing those who have stolen billions of dollars?

The stands taken by those who support the colonizer’s discourse, and its plans for a strategic hegemony by accepting normalization, begs the question: If the technocratic businesswomen use naiveté and ignorance of politics as an excuse, and act without any strategic planning to further the cause of women and society as a whole, then what is the excuse of women parliamentarians and ministers? The ‘Women’s Advocacy Initiative’ is not the only organization that helped develop the activities of colonial feminists. Others include the ‘Women for the Future – Iraq’ and ‘FUTURE’, an acronym for ‘Families United Toward Universal Respect’, an American–Iraqi organization actively engaged with the American military.<sup>31</sup> The latter organization focuses on showcasing the ‘humanity’ of the American military by collecting material donations, such as clothing, packing them in ‘gift boxes’ and distributing them to Iraqi widows and orphans. The other aspect of the organization’s work is exclusively oriented towards women, and designed for publicity. It involves arranging visits for Iraqi elite women members of the organization to the United States, and photographing them hugging, fraternizing and crying with the mothers of American soldiers killed in Iraq, and thanking them for their sons’ service.<sup>32</sup> The ultimate objective of the message is to exonerate the occupation troops of any responsibility, and to equate the attacker with the victim.

## **Conclusion**

Given the manner in which they were established, their sources of funding and the professional path dictated by the scheduling of the political agenda, the focus of the colonial feminists has been on promoting programmes that conform to America's policy requirements in the fight against terrorism, peppering their discourse with terms like 'democracy' and 'women's rights'. This has served to dissipate the portrayal of the violence Iraqi women are subjected to, and has pinned the entire blame of their bitter reality on 'domestic violence', 'social backwardness' and 'terrorism'. Moreover, these colonial feminists never mention the occupation's crimes, depriving people of their right to life, their right to education, work, freedom of movement and human dignity. Iraqi women, once known for their advanced status in sundry fields, lost most of what they had gained since the 1920s, and became hostage to a government of sectarian and ethnic militias funded by the United States of America. In parliament, the activities of feminists and various organizations have caused considerable harm to the feminist movement as a whole, by denuding such terms as 'women's rights' and 'democracy' of their true meaning. Iraqi women are today losing rights they fought valiantly for in the past.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Independent writer, Iraq.

1. This chapter is an update for those who follow the colonial feminists' activities in Iraq, published as Haifa Zangana (2006), 'The three Cyclops of empire building: targeting the fabric of Iraqi society', in Amy Bartholomew (ed.), *Empire Law* (London: Pluto Press); Haifa Zangana (2007), 'Colonial feminism from Washington to Baghdad: "Women for free Iraq" as a case study', in Jacqueline Ismael and William Haddad (eds), *Barriers to Reconciliation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America).

2. 'About us', available at [www.iraqfoundation.org/aboutus\\_overview.htm](http://www.iraqfoundation.org/aboutus_overview.htm), accessed 19 November 2013. Among its founders are Rend Rahim Francke, Kanaan Makkiyeh, Barham Saleh and Hassan Mnemneh; in 2004, Rend Rahim Francke was appointed Iraqi ambassador to the United States.

3. An organization founded in Washington, DC, following the September 11 attacks, by Zeinab al-Suwaij (an Iraqi-American woman) with the aim of 'promoting *tolerance* and the *exchange of ideas* among Muslims and between other peoples'. Its board of directors includes Saadeddin Ibrahim from the Ibn Khaldoun Centre in Egypt and Dr Hilel Fradkin, a neo-conservative, member of the Project for the New American Century and director of the Future of the Muslim World Centre at the American conservative Hudson Institute, well known for its support of Israel.

4. Founded in 2002 by Bruce Jackson, one of the founders of the Project for the New American Century (PNAC); the Committee's only declared objective is 'the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime'.

5. Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD), 'Success stories', available at [www.defenddemocracy.org/about\\_FDD/about\\_FDD\\_show.htm?doc\\_id=257042&attrib\\_id=7615](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/about_FDD/about_FDD_show.htm?doc_id=257042&attrib_id=7615),

accessed August 2004.

6. Haifa Zingana (2008), *madinat alaramel: almara'ah aliraqiya fi maseerat altahreer* (The City of Widows: Iraqi Women in the Path Towards Liberation) (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies), p. 95.

7. Among these measures are holding press conferences and publishing fact sheets on the suffering of Iraqi women under Saddam Hussein's regime. The Office of Global Women's Issues at the American Department of State, Washington, DC, issued a fact sheet on 20 March 2003, entitled 'Iraqi Women under Saddam's Regime: A Population Silenced', addressing American assistance to Iraqi women who suffered under Saddam's regime.

8. Douglass K. Daniel (2008), 'False statements preceded war', *Huffington Post*, 22 January, available at [www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/01/22/study-false-statements-p\\_n\\_82764.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2008/01/22/study-false-statements-p_n_82764.html), accessed 30 July 2013; and the Center for Public Integrity: [www.publicintegrity.org/default.aspx](http://www.publicintegrity.org/default.aspx), link no longer functional.

9. Ann Clwyd (2003), 'See men shredded, then say you don't back war', *The Times*, 18 March.

10. Brendan O'Neal (2004), 'Not a shred of evidence', *Spectator*, 21 February.

11. The FDD is a think-tank that claims to conduct 'research and education on international terrorism – the most serious security threat to the United States and other free, democratic nations'. According to Jeffrey Blankfort, an anti-Zionist Jewish activist in California (former editor of the *Middle East Labor Review*), the Foundation is 'one of the most influential and powerful of the Zionist lobbies which changed its name and sprung into action immediately after 9-11'.

12. Remarks by Andrew S. Natsios, Administrator, USAID, InterAction Forum Closing Plenary Session, 21 May 2003.

13. Among these are the al-Amal Society and Daughter of al-Rafidein in Babel Governorate.

14. Women's organizations put up a banner announcing the type of activity and its source of funding in the hall where the training workshop or lecture is being held; see [www.eset.com](http://www.eset.com), the website of the al-Rafidein Society, on which it announces its upcoming leadership training workshop and its source of funding: National Endowment for Democracy.

15. Svetlana Kuts (2008), 'From intelligent funder to intelligent recipient', *Global Policy Forum*, 21 November, available at [www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/176/31500.html](http://www.globalpolicy.org/component/content/article/176/31500.html), accessed 30 July 2013.

16. 'US commitment to women in Iraq', US Department of State, 22 June 2005.

17. In April 2005, the Iraqi Women's Educational Institute hosted a conference of Iraqi women leaders in Jordan. The conference was held under the auspices of the Independent Women's Forum, the American-Islamic Congress and the FDD, with funding from the International Republican Institute and the National Democratic Institute. The latter two organizations received US\$80 million to promote and publicize the Iraqi elections. The participants were chosen based on their 'leadership abilities and commitment to democracy'. IWF holds Historic Iraqi Women's Leaders Conference, Independent Women Forum, 13 April 2005.

18. Chris Shumway (2005), 'US military held Iraqi women "hostage", new documents reveal', *The New Standard*, 22 April, available at <http://newstandardnews.net/content/index.cfm/items/1726>, accessed 30 July 2013; and Amnesty International (2005), 'Iraq: decades of suffering, now women deserve better', 22 February, available at [www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/001/2005/en/6f025a30-d539-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/mde140012005en.pdf](http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/MDE14/001/2005/en/6f025a30-d539-11dd-8a23-d58a49c0d652/mde140012005en.pdf), accessed 30 July 2013.

19. In August 2004, WAFDI (The Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq) helped to select women from inside Iraq for a visit to the US, the highlight of which was a photo call with George Bush. 'The Iraqi women were joined in the Oval Office by American soldiers that had just returned from Iraq. They were eager to thank the soldiers for their freedom and for their personal sacrifice on behalf of the Iraqi people.' Raz Rasool, the Executive Director of WAFDI, characterized her meeting

with the President saying, 'We have met the brave soldiers, American soldiers', accessed at [www.georgiabizupdate.com/pdf/white-house-women-0408.pdf](http://www.georgiabizupdate.com/pdf/white-house-women-0408.pdf), link no longer functional.

20. The author is quoting here the Minister's statement as mentioned at the site under the title 'There are 2000 phantom women organisations', accessed at <http://ebaa.net/khabar/2004/10/04/khabar010.htm>, link no longer functional.

21. It was formed to protest the draft constitution that made Islam the only source of Iraqi law. The need to seek 'outside support' was clear when the representatives of two Iraqi women's groups, Zeinab al-Suweij, Executive Director of the American-Islamic Congress, and Basma Fikri, from the Women's Alliance for a Democratic Iraq, went to Washington, on 4 August 2005, to garner support for the establishment of two new organizations, as part of the 'More than one source' campaign.

22. *Al Sabah* newspaper, 23 September 2007; see also: Hassan Al Rubaie and Qassim Hussain Mouzan, 'Women MPs and activists: marginalising women weakened their political participation', *Al Sabah* newspaper, 15 May 2012, available at [www.genderclearinghouse.org/upload/Assets/Documents/pdf/oudhouat-majless.pdf](http://www.genderclearinghouse.org/upload/Assets/Documents/pdf/oudhouat-majless.pdf), accessed 19 November 2013.

23. Accessed at [www.america.gov/st/peacesecarabic/2008/December/20081205154525bsibhew0.9175836.html](http://www.america.gov/st/peacesecarabic/2008/December/20081205154525bsibhew0.9175836.html), link no longer functional.

24. Azza Humadi expressed concern that the drawdown of US forces in Iraq would affect her programme; Rick Haverinen (2009), 'Army corps of engineers opens doors for businesswomen in Iraq', 25 March (US Department of Defense), available at [www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=53631](http://www.defense.gov/News/NewsArticle.aspx?ID=53631), accessed 30 July 2013.

25. Ibid.

26. According to the Inspector General's report of January 2005, 'Nearly \$9 billion of money spent on Iraqi reconstruction is unaccounted for', for the period April 2003– 30 June 2004, and the Inspector General's report for 2005 and 2006 revealed that \$14 billion for construction were also unaccounted for. 'Audit: US lost track of \$9 billion in Iraq funds', CNN, 31 January 2005.

27. Accessed at [www.ibisiraq.com/arabic.index-ar.html](http://www.ibisiraq.com/arabic.index-ar.html), link no longer functional.

28. Conference to support Iraqi businesswomen, al-Najaf al-Ashraf News Agency, 23 May 2009.

29. See American military ad videos on YouTube.

30. Transparency International's (TI) Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), 22 September 2008.

31. The organization was established by Joan and Fred Boutros; Joan is a broadcaster appointed soon after the invasion as director of the Iraqi Media Network's Woman and Family Program, and Fred is a colonel in the American Army. The couple came to Iraq with the American occupation forces.

32. Women for Future (n.d.) 'Hugs for future', available at <http://womenforfuture.org/healing.htm>, accessed 30 July 2013.



## CHAPTER 20

# Afghan Women's Resistance and Struggle in Afghanistan and Diasporic Communities

*Elaheh Rostami-Povey\**

### **Introduction**

This chapter<sup>1</sup> challenges a number of important issues: first, the perception of Afghan women in the West as passive victims of the Taliban regime, waiting to be liberated by the West; second, the role of Afghan women in the diaspora, who have either been neglected altogether or perceived as having been liberated in the West; and third, the claim that Afghanistan under occupation is going through a process of reconstruction, the liberation of women and democratization.

### **Under the Taliban**

Poverty in Afghanistan was predominantly the result of war and the collapse of economic activity. Even middle-class and educated women experienced poverty. They worked in their homes, teaching, producing, and exchanging goods and services. Had they not done this, they would have been in the streets begging. Networking and group solidarity enabled these women to survive and help women who suffered extreme poverty and possessed few skills, or those who lost their male head of household and often had no choice other than to become beggars or sex workers. Organizing in this way was an empowering process. Women's secret organizations and networks in Afghanistan were the only functioning organizations which were trusted by the community. Despite the horrors of

war and violent conflict, women in Afghanistan emerged empowered from these circumstances. They became aware of their own capacities to organize and found ways to survive.

The homes of these women and others with specific skills became community homes. Here, many young women and girls, as well as some boys, not only received basic literacy and numeracy training, but also studied different subjects at various levels (biology, chemistry, engineering, English, German, Arabic, Qur'anic Studies, cooking, sewing, knitting, hair-dressing and other skills). Their secret activities lay the foundation for the building of social capital by creating networks of trust and reciprocity that gave cohesion to their communities and embodied great hope for the future.

## **Solidarity between women and men**

Despite the horrifying conditions of life under the Taliban, Afghan women found a space to exercise autonomy and agency. They broke the pre-defined spaces of confinement and silence, and contested the idea that Muslim society is about building barriers to shut women out, condemning them to a life of domesticity and oppression. Afghan men also realized that gender solidarity was essential to their survival, and that the image of male domination that they were expected by ethnic and religious norms to fulfil was unrealistic, and they denied that they should hold all the power and women should be in total subordination to them. Contrary to popular views in the West, many Afghan men opposed traditional ideologies of male superiority and dominance. Therefore, I contest the common assumption that patriarchal ideologies are embedded much more in the psyche of Afghan men than they are in 'liberated' Western men.

Of course, many women involved in education were caught by the Taliban. But even though they were persecuted, jailed and tortured, they continued their bitter struggle. The Taliban's intelligence agency was an extension of the intelligence agency under the communist regime. They employed between 15,000 and 30,000 professional spies, as well as 100,000 paid informers.<sup>2</sup> Some of these spies and informers were women. Women's mobility depended entirely on the *burqa* and the *mahram* (a women's male relation and protector in public places, not necessarily her husband). Many women used these as strategies to continue their secret activities, and many men bravely accompanied women to their secret schools and organizations.

Some of these men were punished – arrested, tortured or even killed – for supporting women. Sometimes it was not possible to have a *mahram* – for example, if there was no man in the family – since a woman had to be married to have a *mahram*. Sometimes the Taliban would force women to marry just so they could have a *mahram*. However, some women bravely and imaginatively invented the phenomenon of hiring a *mahram*. Sima explains:

We paid a man from within the extended family or neighbourhood to pretend that he is our *mahram* and to accompany us in public so that we could go to work. This was also one way for these men to have a job and earn money. In these cases, women's secret work allowed men to earn money. But it was risky for both men and women because if the Taliban would have found out we would have been dead.<sup>3</sup>

In order to understand the gendered nature of Afghan men's experiences of subordination, I asked a number of men whether this sort of thing worked against their masculine identity, and whether they felt a loss of respect for being hired by women in order to earn money. Shikeb explains:

No. For us this was a way of supporting our women, family and community. This was not against our masculine identity. We felt loss of respect and insult to our masculine identity when we were humiliated in public by other men during the civil war and the time of the Taliban.<sup>4</sup>

## **In diaspora**

Twenty-two years of war and violent conflict forced millions of Afghans to leave their country. Since the early 1980s, between 6 million and 7 million Afghani refugees settled in Iran and Pakistan, and a few hundred thousand in other parts of the region, the West and Australia.<sup>5</sup> The multiplicity of women's stories in the diaspora reveals how varied their experiences were, depending on their ethnicity, religion, age, class and geographical positioning as well as their socio-cultural milieu and socio-economic constraints. They were subject to racism, but collectively remembering Afghanistan helped them overcome their alienation. The experiences of these diasporic communities motivated them to develop a vision of rebuilding a better Afghanistan – Afghanistan as a nation.

Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan define gender relations sometimes in the context of greater gender equality, and sometimes in terms of their own complex understanding of how gender relates to Afghan identity. This has enabled them to negotiate the relationship between patriarchy and Islam.

They do not see adhering to the traditional Pakistani dress code, and the Iranian Islamic dress code, including the head scarf, as cultural constraints, oppression or patriarchy (concepts used in the West). They define their goal and social relations as an attempt to create a more progressive Afghan society where women have access to health, education and employment. The ideology of the Iranian women's movement and the support they have received from the women's NGOs in Pakistan has enabled these Afghan women to challenge male, ethnic, age and religious dominations.

In the UK and the USA, however, where they face systematic attacks on their Islamic culture and identity, they tend to hang on to their Muslimness and to a collective Muslim identity. Feeling rejected by the West's condemnation of their culture, they constantly feel the need to be defensive. In these countries, Afghan women's lives have become increasingly confined to resisting Islamophobia and stereotypical representations, and they constantly strive to challenge the West's view of Afghan Muslim women. They are endlessly engaged in mediating between 'Western' values and their Afghan/Muslim cultural identity. Their engagement in this battle has overshadowed their struggle against male domination.

Indeed, the more alien the culture in which Afghani women and men find themselves, the more they turn for sustenance to their traditional communal gender relations. In Iran and in Pakistan, within the Islamic context and culture, they have found a space to enrich their collective Afghan identity. Afghan women in Iran and Pakistan have more in common with Pakistani and Iranian women than Afghan women do with American and British women. They are better prepared to cope with the changes in their lives and their struggles and their resistance to a hostile environment. Afghan women in the UK and the USA have very little space in which to struggle for their gender rights, and feel a political divide between themselves and Western feminists. For many years, Western feminists, whose governments supported the Mujaheddin, Bin Laden and the Taliban, ignored the suffering of Afghan women. However, when Afghan women lobbied the Clinton administration, as late as 1997, the Feminist Majority in the USA campaigned to change US foreign policy and the UN policies to non-recognition of the Taliban. But neither Clinton nor Bush demonstrated any concern for Afghan women until after 9/11, when they used the rhetoric of women's rights to gain support for the war. Eleanor Smeal, leader of the Feminist Majority, supported the war and cheered American and other

Western women in every level of the army on their way ‘to liberate Afghan women from their *Borqa*’.<sup>6</sup>

## **Under invasion**

With the fall of the Taliban, Afghan women expected much from the process of reconstruction. Any optimism that Afghans might have had that they were entering a new era of peace, security and development had been swept away: 39 per cent of the population in urban areas and 69 per cent in rural areas have no access to clean water, and one in eight children dies because of contaminated water. Life expectancy is 44 years; 53 per cent of the total population lives below the poverty line. The adult literacy rate is 29 per cent, and in some areas less than 1 per cent of the population is literate. Only a few Sub-Saharan nations rank lower than Afghanistan. Very little has been invested in reconstruction.<sup>7</sup>

UNICEF has reported that at least one in two girls who should go to school remain at home, and that one in five children do not survive long enough even to reach school age. Others will drop out of school to join the army of child labour, in order to help support their families. Worsening poverty has forced women into sex work – though it existed before the Taliban, since 2001 it has mushroomed to unprecedented levels.<sup>8</sup> There has also been a dramatic rise in cases of self-immolation by women.<sup>9</sup> Women hold more than 25 per cent of the seats in the Afghan parliament. Those women’s rights activists who stand up to protest and defend women’s rights often face intimidation and violence. In 2008, Malalai Joya, representing Farah province, which had been bombed and had suffered many civilian casualties, was expelled from Parliament for courageously speaking out and calling for an end to the invasion of Afghanistan. According to Shukria Barakzai, a Member of Parliament: ‘Our Parliament is a collection of warlords, drug lords, crime lords.’<sup>10</sup> They have threatened to kill her if she continues to talk about women’s rights issues. Out of 68 women MPs, only five speak about women’s rights. Others have been forced either to say nothing or to vote alongside the lords.

The introduction of a large number of foreign troops has failed to bring stability. Insecurity and opium production are linked, as the power of the warlords is based on opium production, and both the Afghanistan

government and NATO forces are dependent on the power of the warlords who control the country. The institutional corruption has flourished under NATO and previously under the American-led invasion. According to the UN and the World Bank reports, drug barons have bought the loyalty of police chiefs and government officials across the country.<sup>11</sup> According to the UN, the earning from opium production is equal to oil revenue in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> Giant mansions are built by corrupt officials, who then rent these mansions to international organizations. According to an Oxfam report, ordinary Afghanis think that national and international forces are an important part of the problem in their country, and are responsible for the insecurity. Also according to Oxfam,<sup>13</sup> while 4 million people are dependent on aid, the growing violent conflicts obstruct the distribution of aid, and every year hundreds of thousands are dying of starvation. Instead of schools and hospitals, national and international forces have provided internet cafes and pornography. Growing hostility to the US-led invaders has driven people to sympathize with the Taliban and al-Qaeda.<sup>14</sup>

After the fall of the Taliban, women had hoped that they would be able to compensate for their losses and would be empowered to participate in the reconstruction of their country. All these factors, however – the opium economy, poverty and unemployment – have not allowed women to put their desired change in gender relations into effect. Despite the deteriorating circumstances, Afghan women are willing to participate in the process of reconstruction. They still hope that their active agency of yesterday and today will take them into the future.

## **Conclusion**

The perception of Afghan women and men of women's liberation is a world apart from that of the invading forces. The Western perception of women's liberation and democracy wrongly advocates that Afghan women and men should simply abandon the repressive practices of their culture and adopt the 'superior' Western culture. Today, the imperial agenda of Washington and London is similar to the old imperial agenda. They use the same thesis of Western superiority to serve their domination of Afghanistan as an important part of their plan for reshaping of the Middle East and Central Asia. However, their typical strategy, which was doomed to failure in the

past, is now doomed to fail in Afghanistan. The US, NATO and International Security Assistance Force, with their military might, cannot force women's liberation and democracy on Afghans. This does not mean that Afghanistan as an Islamic country is unchangeable, or that Afghan women and men are locked into their past, incapable of change.

Afghan women's vision of how to seek gender equality and what it means to them is crystal clear. As Afghan women in my research constantly reiterated, the domination and oppression which Afghan women face is as much imperial as patriarchal. Under these circumstances, the women's movement in Afghanistan can only use the idiom of religion to gain mass support and legitimacy.<sup>15</sup> Despite many obstacles and impediments on their path, women's rights activists in Afghanistan and in the diaspora believe that the conservative tradition of controlling and excluding women has no place in their Afghani and Islamic culture. Since the late nineteenth century, a reformist tendency within the Muslim world, including Afghanistan, has emphasized women's education. Inspired by Afghanistan's history as a modern, Islamic country with a mixture of European and Asian influences and diverse cultures, they believe that it will be possible to achieve progress in the twenty-first century.

In this path they are not alone. There is a rich literature by Muslim and secular feminists, including among others Haleh Afshar, Leila Ahmed, Riffat Hassan and Fatima Mernissi, who identify with Islamic culture, and who for decades have discussed the positive side of Islamic culture and history. Like the Afghan women in my research, these scholars argue that Islam has given women more rights than any other religious tradition. They criticize the conservative and patriarchal tradition in Islam that has taken away these rights and continues to subject women to unequal treatment. At the same time they challenge the perception of Muslim women in the West. They have argued that the West's simplistic views of women's place in Islam are part of the context of narratives of inferiority and otherness. To advance its imperial domination, the West has conveniently ignored the achievements of women in Islamic societies throughout the twentieth century and until today.<sup>16</sup>

The implications of the reaction to current practice in Afghanistan and the Middle East demands far more attention from Western feminists, who have argued that feminist consciousness and social practices are crucial resources in the fight against violence, war and conflict. The invasion of

Afghanistan was facilitated by the rhetoric of gender equality and women's rights, but since the invasion these issues have been manipulated by the government, NGOs and gender experts who present an image of Afghan government and international institutions committed to women's rights.

Women in the Muslim majority societies and women of Islamic culture in the West have been disheartened by the way in which women's oppression has been used to promote war and conflict in Afghanistan and the Middle East. Of course, feminist knowledge production is diverse in the West and the rest of the world. Today we have much advanced and sophisticated feminist theory and methodology, from Marxist-feminism, to anti-racist, anti-colonialist, intersectional, post-structuralist and post-modernist feminisms. All of these were mainly developed in the West by women of colour. Nevertheless, mistrust of Western feminisms in Afghanistan now runs deep. Lila Abu-Lughod has argued that the 'very strong appeal' of the notion of 'saving Afghan women' justifies American intervention in Afghanistan, and that dampens criticisms of intervention by American and European feminists.<sup>17</sup> The hypocritical feminisms of the Republican administration reinforce a Western sense of superiority.

Western feminism has gained academic legitimacy. However, feminists' largely passive stance against neoliberalism and the erosion of the welfare state has meant deterioration of the lives of millions of poorer women and women of colour in the West and throughout the world. As violence against women, sexism and the persistence of conventional gender relations continue, powerful governments and financial and military institutions co-opt the rhetoric and the language of feminism. These concepts are redefined to imply that the West, especially the USA, is civilized, while other civilizations border on barbarism. These issues have been manipulated with considerable success and have become tools to mask global misogynist practices, and to justify war and imperial domination.<sup>18</sup>

Today, Western feminism can benefit from Afghan women's critical adaptation of the ideas of individualism and the values of Westernization which are not unambiguously beneficial. Afghan women in the USA were and still are critical of the Feminist Majority and have become suspicious of their support. Even today, these American feminists campaign for further troop escalation and war in Afghanistan and, instead of understanding Afghan women's struggle and culture, easily fall into the trap of the idea that Islamic culture is incompatible with the Western principle of egalitarian



thought, especially in the context of gender equality and democracy. Based on this theory, they have used Afghan women's criticisms of their own local patriarchal structures to portray Afghan and Islamic culture as inferior to Western culture, and have used this perceived inferiority to justify the participation of Western women in the invasion of Afghanistan. They have devalued Afghan culture by presuming that the only way for Afghan women's liberation is to adapt to a Western model, but Afghan women have found Western feminism to be elitist, imperialist and disconnected from the reality of their lives.

## Notes

\* SOAS, University of London, UK.

1. This chapter is based on my book, *Afghan Women, Identity and Invasion* (London: Zed Books, 2007), which is based on field research in Afghanistan in 2002 and 2005, and in Iran, Pakistan, UK and USA 2004–5, funded by the Economic, Social Research Council (ESRC), UK.

2. Ahmed Rashid (2002), *Taliban, Islam, Oil and the New Great Game in Central Asia* (London: I.B.Tauris).

3. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, p. 36.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 37.

5. UNHCR Statistical Yearbook, 2003 and 2004.

6. Iris Marion Young (2003), 'The logic of masculinist protection: reflections on the current security state', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 29(1), pp. 1–25.

7. United Nations Development Program (UNDP) (2005), 'Afghanistan's future holds promise and peril', 21 February.

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10. Shukria Barakzai, cited in Clancy Chassay (2008), 'Acid attacks and rape: growing threat to women who oppose traditional order', *Guardian*, 22 November.

11. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, pp. 40–50.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 55–9.

13. Oxfam (2008), 'Local peacebuilding urgently needed to reduce insecurity in Afghanistan, Oxfam says', 27 February, available at [www.oxfam.org/en/news/2008/pr080228\\_peacebuilding\\_needed\\_in\\_afghanistan](http://www.oxfam.org/en/news/2008/pr080228_peacebuilding_needed_in_afghanistan), accessed 20 November 2013.

14. Sultan Barakat (2004), *Reconstructing War-torn Societies, Afghanistan*, Third World Quarterly Series (London: Palgrave Macmillan).

15. Rostami-Povey, *Afghan Women*, pp. 129–42.

16. Haleh Afshar, Rob Aitken and Myfanwy Franks (2005), 'Feminisms, Islamophobia and identities', *Political Studies*, 53(2), pp. 262–83; Leila Ahmed (1992), *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press); Riffat Hassan (2002), 'Muslim women's rights: a contemporary debate', in Sunita Mehta (ed.), *Women for Afghan Women: Shattering Myths and Claiming the Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan); Fatima Mernissi (2001), *Scheherazade Goes West* (New York, NY: Western Square Press).

17. Lila Abu-Lughod (2002), 'Do Muslim women really need saving? Anthropological reflections on cultural relativism and its others', *American Anthropologist*, 104(3), pp. 783–90.
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## CHAPTER 21

# Women Struggling Against the Legacy of Colonialism in East Asia

*Mari Oka\**

Fatima Mernissi's autobiographical fiction *Dreams of Trespass* was one of the textbooks I used to use when teaching third-world feminism. The author deliberately and repeatedly depicts the nature of French colonial repression and likens it to the patriarchal repression of Moroccan women. The key term of the book, '*alhudud*', implies not only the borders that the patriarchy draws to confine women in the harem, but also the borders colonialism draws on the land of Morocco to deprive Moroccans of their national freedom. The dual meaning of the title is very clear. The author reveals through little Fatima's growing self-consciousness as a Moroccan woman that in the formation of third-world female subjectivity resistance to colonialism plays as vital a role as resistance to the patriarchal system.

Nevertheless, for most of the Japanese students who read the text, Morocco's repression under French colonialism and the Moroccan people's national resistance to it are reduced to a mere historical setting of the story where the growth of little Fatima's consciousness as a woman is being told. The students' failure to recognize the meaning of colonialism in Mernissi's book reflects the lack of awareness in Japanese society of the history of colonialism.

Sixty-four years ago, Japan was totally defeated by the USA in World War II; most of the Japanese municipal capital cities were bombarded and destroyed; 3 million soldiers were killed abroad. In the Japanese national memory, the Japanese people were the victims of the tragic war that the military authorities brought about. This is not a lie, but it is also true that Japan was historically an imperial power that carried out the colonial

invasion of East and South-Eastern Asian countries, causing enormous damage, suffering and pain to the people in these countries. However, this uncomfortable fact has long been obliterated, negated or covered up in the Japanese national collective memory, just as is the memory of the Palestinian *nakba* in the Israeli national memory. Located at either end of Asia, it is as if Japan were in alliance with Israel, an alliance of the historical negation of their own colonialist crimes.

In 1991, a Korean woman, Kim Hak-Sung, courageously came forward to declare that she was a former Japanese ‘comfort woman’ – that is, a victim of Japanese military sex slavery during the Asian Pacific War. She demanded a formal apology from the Japanese government and personal compensation for her suffering. Encouraged and empowered by her intrepid public appearance, numerous victims of Japanese military sex slavery in Asian countries followed her example.

The mass appearance in public of these Asian women demanding the restoration of their human dignity profoundly shook Japanese society. The latter had long enjoyed the oblivion of its uncomfortable colonialist past in complicity with patriarchy, which made it difficult for women to talk about their sexual suffering. Now, these Asian women made the people of Japan confront their past crimes. During the following decade, Japanese society was in a virtual state of civil war over the national memory: the dispute was between those who wished to negate the past, and those who, in responding to the victims, wished to remember the crimes Japanese colonial violence had perpetrated in other Asian countries, and to engrave these memories in our national history. Behind the wish to remember was the belief that it was the indispensable task of Japan to reconcile with the victims and create a mutually peaceful future.

In the second half of the 1990s, such beliefs made considerable inroads. Most Japanese history textbooks at secondary school level mentioned Japanese military sex slavery. In 2000, the International Tribunal on wartime sexual violence was held in Tokyo, and the late Emperor Hirohito’s guilt was declared. This declaration was of enormous political and historical significance considering that the Emperor had never been tried before over any crime.

In the meantime, there began a counter-attack of the opposing group, whose project was to publish a new history textbook aimed at educating

Japanese citizens so they could be proud of their country. This textbook totally negated the crimes that Japanese colonialism had committed in Asia.

Now, almost two decades have elapsed since Kim Hak-Sung told her story, and many of the victims of Japanese colonial violence have already passed away. The Japanese government and the intellectuals who deny Japan's colonial history seem to anticipate the day when all victims of Japanese colonial crimes pass away, just as the Zionists are anticipating the same thing concerning the victims of the *nakba*. Both governments believe that once all their victims pass away, their own crimes will disappear. That is not true. We should not allow it to be true.

While Japanese military sex slavery can be certainly acknowledged among the feminists both inside and outside Japan as a significant feminist issue, there is another struggle of women in Japan which also illustrates the unfinished decolonization of Japanese society but is rarely recognized as part of a feminist agenda: that is, the struggle of Korean women residents in the Utoro area of the city of Kyoto, Japan.

Utoro is an area whose population consists mostly of elderly Koreans in their 80s and above who came to Japan from Korea in the 1930s and gathered in Utoro as construction workers. After the war, and with nowhere to go, they remained in Utoro. Although born as Japanese citizens during the Japanese colonial era in Korea, they were deprived without their consent of their citizenship by the Japanese government. They thus became stateless and lost their civil rights. Because they are not Japanese citizens, the area in which these people live has long been excluded from the benefits of administrative services, which means that they have been obliged to live in incredibly bad conditions for decades, even while Japanese society in general enjoyed an increasingly high standard of living. Over time, they came to be regarded as illegal squatters and are threatened with eviction at a moment's notice. They are denied a national pension because they are not Japanese and some of them, despite their great age, are still obliged to work to sustain themselves.

These elderly Koreans of both sexes in Utoro are still struggling today with the legacy of Japanese colonialism, and women in particular have had to bear much of the burden. Their poverty, as well as patriarchal values, deprived them of the chance to receive an education and they remained illiterate their entire lives. When they were young they had to work to support their parents, and then, as they grew older, continued to work to

support their own children and husbands. Being Koreans and women, as well as illiterate, they could get only very limited jobs, and they have been exploited because of their ethnicity, gender and illiteracy. Recently they went to court over the denial of their national pension, but the court dismissed their appeal. Their access to social justice is structurally and utterly prohibited.

Like the victims of Japanese military sex slavery, the experiences of these people are denied a place in the Japanese national memory. The Japanese state is just waiting for them to die, believing that their troubling memories of Japanese national history will then be lost forever.

Their voices can hardly be heard, but we can observe the echo of their voices in the various narratives of Palestinian refugee women in camps in Lebanon that Professor Rosemary Sayegh collected, as well as in the works of Arab feminists like the Palestinian novelist Sahar Khalifeh and the Moroccan writer Laila Abu-Zeid, to name but a few. Through these literary works and also through my own visits to the refugee camps in Lebanon and the West Bank, I learned that the daily lives of the Utoro women constitute a form of resistance against the social discrimination caused by Japanese colonialism and the gender discrimination of the patriarchy. Their lives are also a struggle against historical and social injustice, and for the restoration of their human dignity.

Because of my studies in modern Arabic literature and my engagement with the Palestinian cause, I became aware of the colonial violence carried out in my own country which continues in the present. It would otherwise have been very hard for me to notice the violence of Japanese colonial history as a member of the national majority enjoying full citizenship rights as a Japanese person. I therefore owe my political awareness of colonialism and its violence in Japan to the Arab feminists and their diverse and respected works.

The final words that the late Edward Said mentioned before his death were 'Do not forget Palestine', which means to me, in my Japanese context, do not forget the *nakba* which occurred in Asia some 60 years ago, because of Japanese colonialism. This statement also means to me that we should never forget those who have not stopped fighting for the restoration of human dignity over the generations.

## Note

\* Kyoto University, Japan.

## CHAPTER 22

### Conflicts and Wars: Women's Silent Discourse\*

*Anicée al Amine Merhi\*\**

*In memory of Adnan Houballah*

#### **The lost object**

In the series of national and civil wars that we have lived through in Lebanon, we have each lost a great deal: loved ones and homes, incomes and jobs, projects, dreams and aspirations. War, for 'Alawiyya Subh, is 'the sleep of life'; for Ralph Rizkallah, it is the time when we are reduced to mere biological creatures; and for Ahmad Beydoun, it is a system that has a life of its own, complete with daily events, rituals, advantages and various pathways.

For Adnan Houballah, it is the lost object. It is our lifetime passing us by while we run, trying to catch up with it, huddled in the coincidence of unanswered questions. Chief among these losses, which I believe we have not stopped mourning, is the modernization project of the 1970s that heralded a promising feminist awakening. To lose a dear one is one thing; to lose a dream is yet another. A dream is one's life.

One mourns the lost object not only with sadness, but also with an inhibited ability to face the quotidian affairs of life for a very long time. On the one hand, mourning is remembering and reliving all that links us to the lost object, and, on the other, trying to rebuild our lives once we have succeeded in severing our ties to it. One way we could accomplish this separation is to write about the lost object, and put an end to a mourning that has lasted far too long.



What have all the consecutive wars we have lived through done to the women's project of change, to their status and to their discourse? I shall try to find some answers to this question from a psychoanalytical point of view.

## **Transformations**

In a traditional war between two countries, hatred and spite are gathered together and thrown at the enemy, while love flourishes within society and fosters solidarity and support among the people. In a civil war, the reverse happens. Hatred turns towards the inside, and does its damage within the country's social network. Every citizen becomes a potential enemy to the other; this creates a gap in society and fosters suspicion, caution, fear and introversion. The world is divided into two warring factions, and individuals retreat into their respective families or support groups, seeking protection. This social fragmentation reminds us of the political model, which is not one person's monopoly. Every leader claims ownership of the model and its legitimacy; he is the only one who possesses the truth, a claim that allows him to kill others without batting an eyelid. The smallest narcissistic difference<sup>1</sup> is reduced to the smallest unit – that is, 'the letter' (death by identity card).

Instead of the brotherhood of solidarity that occurs in traditional wars and revolutions, civil wars beget large-scale fratricide. The centre is Oedipal. Every civil war starts by the killing of everything that the father/the law represents in the state system, and at all possible levels: history, the image of the Other/the partner in the nation, and the infrastructure, including buildings, establishments, symbols, landmarks and geography.

The place that the symbolic father/the law once occupied is now beyond anyone's control, particularly in the imagination of the citizens, which leads to the fighters' enjoyment in crossing every boundary and violating every moral code. In other words, without restraining or disciplining factors to stand in their faces, psychotic fantasies are fully satisfied.

The symbolic father's aura has diminished; the real father, however, is either in the shelter or huddled in a corner of the house. The imagined father's role is taken over by the chief/the leader with his speeches and tales about the significance and importance of the impending battle in attaining the ultimate objective. The patriarchal system is the instrument of subjugation to the authority of he who controls the collective destiny.

In civil war, this patriarchal system assumes its masculine dimension, though only in measure to the leader's imagined image. According to former fighter Bilal Khabiz:

the leaders were our men, and we, the few women (both males and females) were in his harem... however, no one should think that this domination bothered us in any way; most of the time it was what we wanted and sought. It was as if by turning us into females (oriental feminisation) we were being stimulated to an extreme degree.<sup>2</sup>

The sons/brothers hold on to power through merciless violence, and the mother assumes a bigger role. Her embrace becomes more powerful, and she becomes the protector of life, the filter of pain and the sanctuary of love. But she also takes on the responsibility for mourning and death. The more entrenched the system of war becomes, with its train of trauma and fear of the unknown, especially in the face of death, the more people turn to faith and their religion with the hope of reining in their deadly impulses, and giving meaning and a name to an irrational reality. This happened to all religious groups (see, for example, Jocelyn Khoueiry's and Regina Sneifer's accounts of their participation in the civil war).<sup>3</sup> Throwing oneself into the sacred protects one from the conflict within, and safeguards against the constant threat from the outside. All change-oriented projects and visions have gone with the wind. The sacred became a pure refuge, unequivocally immaculate.<sup>4</sup> In the sacred, there is no untidy disagreement. The sacred leads us back to the truth in a patriarchal, redemptive space that manifests itself on two different levels:

- The divine sacred and everything it involves: affiliation, name, origins, family relationships, rituals, worship and daily events.
- The body and abhorrence of the physical;<sup>5</sup> the group is threatened only when the bodies of its women are violated, not because the group loves the women, but because a woman is the womb: 'in the act of rape, men take possession of the womb, the source of the enemy's lineage; they destroy the other by violating his ownership of this sacred place'.<sup>6</sup> It is as though the feminine concerns the entire group; every missile is a violation, the rape, humiliation and pollution of the group's body. From this come the obsessive rituals of cleansing the impure and defiled body of the group to safeguard the lineage. The chest (the breast) is covered as a place analogous to the womb.

Many rituals are included in the obsession with identity<sup>7</sup> and found in the obsessed: persistence, repetition, order, organization and tenacity are there to ensure the body's purity. Thus we realize that modernity and all it has offered us in terms of reconfiguring the facts, and ushering in new structures, visions and divergences, is now as silent as death itself. We have lost the sense of tomorrow, and with it our dreams for the future. We cling to a nostalgia for the past because it is so much better than that which we see in the tattered present.

## **Women and war**

If the obsession with identity occupies the cultural and political domains, then there is a forgotten person on whom the war's repercussions ultimately fall: the woman. She is the *different other* that should be removed (i.e. by death in the literal and figurative sense). What Evelyn Accad both advances and refutes in her book,<sup>8</sup> *Des Femmes, des Hommes, et la Guerre: Fiction et réalité* – a major work on war from a feminist perspective – is important here. Women, however, continue forging ahead, as they do in Andrée Chedid's play *La maison sans racines* (The House without Roots). They march onward because women are resisters; they resist death, dislocation, marginalization, abandonment, oblivion and all forms of threats.

## **Woman is resistance**

I borrow this title from Youmna el-Eid's article, 'Woman is resistance', published in the Winter 2000 issue of *Nour*, entitled '[Lebanese] women in the face of Israeli occupation'.<sup>9</sup> 'Woman is resistance' is a very important title that invites us to wonder about women's place in war, because generally when war is talked of, what comes to mind is the powerlessness of women. What I shall present here is exactly the opposite, with the assumption that, in war, women stand out as resistance personified, either through their participation in combat alongside the men, or as protectors of life. The silence that surrounds this issue does not come from those who hold all the power, but also from women themselves, anywhere in the world!

In the same issue of *Nour*, under the title *alnisa': aidan nawaqis alhuthuth fi almuqawama* (Women... luckless in resistance also!), Munther Jaber draws attention to the fact that men are granted the honour of resistance and, thereafter, of carrying its splendour and wearing its crown of glory. The image of women is totally absent from the scene; when present at all, they are shown in the foreground, fighting fear and hunger. Such considerations have been with us for a long, long time, and have turned the nation's people into a group of 'men without women', as al-Jawhari defines 'the nation'. Jaber gives examples of resistance by women in times of trouble, when mass migration under arms becomes a woman's domain, par excellence.

When addressing life in south Lebanon under Israeli occupation, the writer examines three kinds of women's work, as follows.

*(a) Tobacco farming: the bread and salt of steadfastness*

It is not a secret that income from this particular agricultural sector, the main burden of which is borne by women, is the principal revenue of the southern region's inhabitants. In the writer's opinion, the tightly knit social fabric in the south was constructed by this sector of the economy to bind the inhabitants of the border region together. Similarly, in the civil war, and during the siege of Deir el-Qamar, I met a number of women in that town who worked hard making lace together in the dark nights in order to earn family income and to have the means to marry off their daughters.

*(b) The crossing points: the arteries of patience*

During the occupation, women formed the largest human bridge between the occupied areas and the rest of the country. They formed an alternative fund of services. As they passed through different crossing points they carried with them tenders, contracts, letters, money, testimonies, good news, stories, questions and answers, and opinions on family and domestic events such as marriages, divorces and family disagreements. They also carried nostalgia, yearning and counsel, which they ferried across the lines for those forced to live apart from their loved ones in the south.

### (c) Words of light

Here, Munther Jaber offers us something totally unexpected. He includes the quotidian and domestic discourse of women among the means of resistance, and describes it as a continuous project. In this discourse he includes the blessings (*du'a*) women offer when they wish someone a long life, good health or safety; their answered prayers surpass in efficacy the father's custodial and protective wing: 'The mother's wing,' says the proverb, 'gathers together, while the father's flies away.' The words of blessing and prayer that the writer describes are uttered not only by mothers, but also maternal and paternal aunts, sisters, grandmothers, neighbours.

This form of resistance by women is not shy and directed inwards, nor is it furtive, secret or limited to the training fields; it is ongoing, widespread and not amenable to reconnoitring or spying. It swings and swaggers along, intruding everywhere, and seeing everything.

Women are the Other; they work silently and differently from men. However, despite all this praise and celebration of the Other/the upholder of life, women are rarely if ever mentioned. In another article written in a different context, Dr Jaber asks the following questions: what is the link between masculinity and memory (in Arabic *althukura* and *althakira* respectively)? What is the link between femininity and forgetfulness (in Arabic: *alniswiyya* and *alnisyan* respectively)? His answer is: we should take our queue from al-Jawhari's book *sihah fil lugha* (Healing the Language). As al-Jawhari defines it, 'male' (*thakar*) is 'the opposite of female', and a 'name' (*thikr*) means 'good reputation and praise'. As for his definition of 'forgot', we find the following progression – *nasa: alniswa, walniswa, walnisa' walniswan* – thus from 'forgot' through 'woman' and 'women' and back to 'forgetfulness'. (The Arabic words for women and forgetfulness are very similar.) Forgetfulness is the opposite of memory and memorization, which are close to 'male' (*thakar*).

Based on the above, we arrive at two conclusions:

1. Forgetting women's achievements is intuitive; theirs are achievements that cannot be depended upon. This is something that women themselves believe to be true.

- alniswa* , *walniswa* , *walnisa* ' *walniswan* : the plural of 'woman'
2. without mentioning her. This brings up all the questions surrounding the possibility of turning a woman's work + another woman's work into the plural form, feminism (*niswi*).

The nation is composed of 'men without women'. Women move in a masculine space, among people who, once they agree on anything, regard it as the truth. Women's contacts with their husbands, brothers, community and nation are the measure of truth and the authority for maintaining it. This group was formed or came together only in the context of war, and because of it.<sup>10</sup>

A reading of the autobiographies of women who fought in wars, whether Jocelyn Khoueiry with the *Kataeb* (Phalange) Party and Regina Sneifer with the Lebanese Forces, the resistance fighters and members of the leftist factions in the Lebanese Civil War, Palestinian fighters, Irish and Israelis – or female fighters anywhere in the world – shows that women who take part in active combat eliminate the feminine, just as men do, because the nation is composed of men.

Whether women helped protect life behind the lines, or took part in active combat, just as men did, there is no mention of them, and theirs is a silent discourse. They wield a secret power that infuses the arteries of meaning with a clamour whose far-reaching echo knows no limit.

## **The sisters: denial of the self**

When Youmna el-Eid asked me to write an article for the issue of *Nour* to which I referred earlier,<sup>11</sup> I decided to contact Hezbollah to learn about the role of women in the resistance. I then conducted interviews with some women, which were very telling.

### *The widow of one of the leaders*

She is the Muslim, the fighter and the resisting mother; she is patience in the face of aggression; she is the bearer of responsibilities; she brings up the children and sees to their marriages once they are grown up. As far as she is concerned, the most important form of resistance is against the devil within;

she believes she has to remain patient, and to accept sacrifice until liberation is achieved.

### *The blind man's wife*

I have a degree in philosophy; I decided to marry him after he lost his sight during a military operation. I chose him against my parents' wishes... This is how I resist. Fatima al-Zahra' [the Prophet's daughter, wife of the Imam Ali, and mother of Imams Hassan and Hussein, the martyr] is my example in life; she is a mother, and I am his mother and his eyes... Behind every great man is a great woman; women make men what they are.

### *The fiancée of a prisoner of war held in an Israeli jail*

She said:

People were watching to see me feel defeated; my patience and my waiting for him are my own personal forms of resistance. They tried to humiliate him by telling him that his fiancée would leave him; my attitude strengthens his resolve. We have endured misfortune, but have patience just like *sayyida* Zeinab [the Lady Zeinab, sister of the Imam al Hussein] who, through patience and *jihad*, succeeded in leading the nation after the martyrdom of Imam al Hussein. I consider myself part of her... What vexes the Israelis most is this dress I wear [the *chador*], which they consider resistance in itself.

At that time, this woman's sisters, alongside other women, prevented the Israelis from considering the village part of their occupied 'security belt'.

My fourth interview was with one of the women in charge of Hezbollah's women's department, an agricultural engineer. Her role in the resistance was managing social and cultural life at all levels.

As for the 'roving' detainee, Khadija Haraz (a woman *jihadist* in *al-Ansar* detention camp), an article about her in the daily *An-Nahar*<sup>12</sup> was entitled 'I suffered the harshest forms of torture but gained the most valuable human experience imaginable'. In a lecture, she said: 'Prison is a rich experience that no university can ever teach. The most important part of it is self-denial.'

These women are the Zeinabs<sup>13</sup> who defended what remained of the Prophet's family and followers after the battle of Karbala' (during which Imam al Hussein was martyred), when Imam al Hussein uttered the famous cry, 'Oh my sister.'

Omar abul-Nasr al-Lubnani said:

Zeinab proved that of all the members of the Prophet's family, she had the most courage, eloquence and rhetorical ability. Her behaviour at the battle of Karbala and after earned her widespread fame, and she became known for her cogency, strength, courage and eloquence, so much so that she became an example to others, to which historians and writers bear testament. Those who follow her example will see in her the symbols of truth, virtue, courage, gallantry, eloquence, and strength of heart, the model of asceticism and piety, chastity and magnanimity; and in this is a lesson worth learning.<sup>14</sup>

Sayyida Zeinab's most important virtue was asceticism: 'And I offered the flower of life, money, home, husband, children, servants and retinue.'<sup>15</sup>

Based on the above, what we have here is an example, a model and a lesson: the courageous and ascetic sister. Is Zeinab's behaviour different as a historic model from that of Antigone in Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*? Is this model an anomaly for any woman, from any religious faith and any society?

In our Arab Islamic culture, Sayyida Zeinab has become a model of solidarity building in times of war, and at her shrines widows and suffering human beings in Syria and Egypt weep. In the West, in the meantime, Antigone's example is still a subject of debate in philosophy, literature, theatre and psychoanalysis. It is also a relevant subject of debate in matters concerning desire, the law, power and democracy.

Did Antigone not refuse to marry, and did she not go to her death willingly? She refused to submit to Creon's will and give up her right to bury her brother; her answer to him was strong, courageous and eloquent. She said what she had to say and marched to her death.

Regina Sneifer says: 'If someone asks me today to summarise in one short sentence my years of learning, I would be at pains to come up with a better sentence than "the years my *I* was suffocated". At home, my mother brought us up to believe that girls do not count, while other women taught us day after day at school that the *I* is a detestable, hateful thing, and that the greatest virtues are self-sacrifice and self-denial.'<sup>16</sup>

We have here the obliteration of the feminine in a group whose existence is built on war, a group among which there is no place for a woman who is her own person and has her own name, desires and rights. In April 1996, during the mass migration northward that followed the first massacre in Qana, in the south, a woman among a throng of refugees who had taken refuge in a school in Ashrafieh, Beirut was exploding with anger and uttered a single sentence in front of the cameras. She said it with a vigour



that only people with unparalleled strength can muster: ‘They [the Israelis] kill and we have babies.’

The woman, slotted to be forgotten in the Eden of human symbolism, uses all the means at her disposal: she presents herself as a sister (and a sister is outside the domain of sex), a fertile organ, whereby she gains more power and becomes either asexual or undesirable, or, alternatively, sheds her femininity and becomes more masculine (identifying with the male). Are these not forms of self-denial and rejection of the feminine?

If what we are witnessing today is part of the daily misfortunes that we do not like to see, we could leap to the world of poetry to find proof of the above. Salma al-Khadra al-Jayyousi writes of the forgotten women poets in Arab history:

I believe that women’s poetry was neglected because female poets did not pay due attention to ardour and vigour. al-Khansa’ was the only poet whose poetry has reached us intact, probably because her poetry was similar to that of male poets. Her tributes to her slain brother Sakhr are full of ardour, vigour and chivalry.<sup>17</sup>

## **The family is carried in the soul**

At the end of the two-year war in Lebanon (1975–6), I was married and belonged to no political party. Still, I received regular news about ‘the comrades in the Communist Party’, and comrade Leila was at the front with Israel. I was fascinated by that liberation movement. It represented freedom, revolution and feminism all in one. Zeinab was not one of our models: Simone de Beauvoir was the name on the tongue of every woman aspiring for change. I chose the women of the south as the subject for my thesis,<sup>18</sup> comparing them to the women of Beirut, on the assumption that southern women were more self-aware and conscious of what they wanted of their future. My meetings with southern women living in Beirut were a surprise to me; they talked about sex, open relations and sexual freedom with the self-confidence of those who know their rights. When I used Madeleine Pax-Touma’s three-person test, designed to measure change in women and used during the Decade for Women, 1975–85, I found that the future aspirations of Lebanese women, especially the southerners among them, opposed those of French, Belgian, Turkish or Israeli women. Like anyone who had found exactly what she had been looking for, I was ecstatic,

especially when Madeleine Pax-Touma invited me to Paris because the international test group wished to honour me.

It seems that the results of my research had added a new variable to the test that no one had noticed before. The test works by putting one of four numbers (1, 2, 3 or 4) against, near or after the indicator, such as a woman's relationship with her family and group. The surprise was that Lebanese women, especially the liberated women of the south, scored the highest mark (i.e. number 1), which indicated a high rate of adherence to the group. *The most liberated woman scores the highest rate of adherence to the group!* I did not understand the significance of this at the time, nor did I understand why I was being honoured; so I returned home and kept quiet. After that, I could not write at all: it was as though a haze had clouded my vision and threw me into a state of confusion that lasted a very long time. I emerged from it only after ten years of psychoanalysis.

In 2005, I had a patient by the name of Zeinab. Although Zeinab was a liberated woman, living her life according to her own rules, she wept a great deal, and wept bitterly. I never saw anyone cry so much. By sheer coincidence, my mother, sisters and I decided at that time to go on a pilgrimage to the tomb of Sitti (my Lady) Zeinab in Damascus; there, in front of her prayer niche, I cried my eyes out. I cried inconsolably in front of al Hussein's head, lying all alone in a back room at the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus.<sup>19</sup>

Most probably, the story of Sayyida Zeinab I used to hear at '*ashoura*'<sup>20</sup> gatherings, when I accompanied my mother to the condolence sessions at her aunt Hajja Zakia's home, had imprinted itself in my subconscious, and was later repressed and forgotten. I could not have been more than three years old, but I can see the scene as if it were only yesterday: a group of women crying inconsolably together and the professional mourner, Hasiba, recounting the story of al Hussein and of the misfortunes of Zeinab, all alone with no man to protect her. No father, brother or community, and dragging behind her those left of Prophet's family, the women and the children. I, a frightened three-year-old girl, was standing behind the door. I may have been crying; I do not know. Zeinab became for me the signifier of women's lot in war: abandonment, and fear of being left alone with the children. How terrified I was of war!

*And I knew:* in my feminist-leaning thesis I wrote a great deal about women, sex, revolution, freedom and feminism. My thesis, however, was

written in French, the language of the signifier Simone de Beauvoir. She is the opposite of the other woman, the ascetic Zeinab, who willingly gives up life's pleasures. In my 'I' was a deep split between Zeinab and Simone de Beauvoir, and neither of the two recognizes the other. What unites them, however, is the ability to speak and argue; one raises her voice in defence of the family and the community, and the other in defence of the feminine self. In the face of such a loss of meaning, I sought psychoanalysis, in which the unconscious is both knowledge and guide, a knowledge that has not yet found its proper place in Arab culture. So I forged ahead, a stranger in my own language. This estrangement became all the more acute when I read about our foremother Hagar, rejected and expelled, her name no longer mentioned. Her gesture, however, as she searched for water for her child, Ismail, is a ritual repeated at every Hajj as pilgrims run between al-Safa and al-Marwa.

The family is in the soul, and as long as it is there, what would we do if anyone in it ever came to harm?

## **A vignette from the clinic**

Dalal has been coming to my clinic for almost three years. She is from the Chouf region, married and mother to two children. In the heat of her disagreement with her father, Dalal had the following dream:

The *Kataeb* (Phalange) Party is at the top of the hill, looking for her father. She tells him 'Don't worry. I will hide you'... She looks around... 'They will search for him everywhere, in all the cupboards. I will therefore hide him in the water reservoir.' She then goes down to the ground floor to keep watch, because her maternal grandfather and grandmother are there, and her grandfather is wanted in Syria.

Dalal, naturally, had nothing to do with any political party. During the analysis, a link was made between the water in the womb, which binds the family together, and the water in the reservoir; Dalal could find no place to protect her father other than her own womb.

Protecting one's family and community is a responsibility borne internally by women in different ways. The clearest proof of this, which escapes overt symbolism, occurs during wartime. It is a situation that has to do with the soul, its internalized ambivalence between love and hate, and all that this entails in terms of confrontation with a woman's femininity, in particular with her own motherhood.

Women either keep silent or cry bitterly when they realize that the part that they played in the war has only furthered the interests of the leaders who take everyone to the precipice of violence and death. The contemporary Antigones follow the same path: protecting the father and the name/the affiliation with the group. They sacrifice their femininity and youth, and only realize what they have done once they return to the self. Jocelyn Khoueiry writes:

Your Lebanon will be tomorrow what you are today... Women are the image of this new human being, and its value is in its identity. This is why we should start calling women back from their long absence and ask them for more conscious and total commitment to issues that concern the nation and society, based on a comparison between the two women who forged humanity's history, Eve and Mary.... and the historic dynamism resulting from our commitment to each respectively.<sup>21</sup>

Jocelyn Khoueiry went from participating in military combat alongside men, in the *Kataeb's* women's brigade, and doing it even better than they did, to the affirmation of life; Regina Sneifer works in social rehabilitation in France, and comrade Leila went to Switzerland after the two-year war, and today works there as a therapist.

To summarize the complex relationship between women and war, I can say the following. In his theory, Lacan says that women are not altogether subject to the phallic order: '*Elle n'est pas toute dans l'ordre phallique*.'<sup>22</sup> When the woman realizes that she is outside this system, the line of which she has long been toeing, a new self emerges within her, a self-inspired by images that formed the bases of a historical/social/ foundational imagination. These are Eve of desire and knowledge of sex; Mary, the Holy Mother; Zeinab, the abandoned sister/daughter; Hagar, the foundational slave, exiled and wilfully forgotten. In each woman is an aspect of these and other images. Women resist death and exile, perhaps through all these images together and in an endless variety of forms, since they have to create new images of existence/resistance without expecting applause. Given that, women are both resistance and feminism because they are on the side of life, rather than death, but with a silent discourse in this part of the world.

It is as if Hagar's gesture continues to be repeated in silence, exactly as it happened. Hagar looked up to heaven and called God 'the Vision' because he heard her ('*Ismail*' means 'God has heard') and she did not die. She looked into the bowels of the earth, from which came the water. She remains exiled and alone. Is her name not Hagar ('abandoned' in Arabic)?

## Notes

- \* Translated from the Arabic.
- \*\* Psychoanalyst, Bahithat.
1. Dr Adnan Houbballah (1996), *Le virus de la violence: la guerre civile en chacun de nous* (Paris: Albin Michel), p. 51.
  2. Bilal Khabiz, 'muraja'a lisirat muqatel: 'ahdan lil shuhada'' (Review of a fighter's biography: a promise to the martyrs), 'Political status of women in Lebanon and the Arab world', *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 4, pp. 402.
  3. Jocelyn Khoeiry, 'Autobiography', *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 4, pp. 377–97; Regina Sneifer (2009), *alqaitu alsilah, imra'ah fi khadam alharb allubnaniya* (I Laid Down My Arms: A Woman In The Lebanese Civil War) (Beirut: al-farabi).
  4. Houbballah, *Le virus de la violence*, p. 37.
  5. Ahmad Beydoun (1997), 'fiqh aljasad fi kitab alnihaya' (Doctrine of the body in the book of ends), in *Kaliman: min mufradat allugha ila murakabat althiqafa* (From Diction to Elements of Culture) (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid), p. 234.  
See also 'maqt 'odwi'' (Abhorrence of the Organic). In this article the body exits the realm of the organic and becomes the property of the group, in the imagination.
  6. Houbballah, *Le virus de la violence*, p. 37.
  7. Ahmad Beydoun (1997), 'hijas alhawiyya' (The obsession with identity), in *Kaliman: min mufradat allugha ila murakabat althiqafa* (From Diction to Elements of Culture) (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid), p. 445.
  8. Evelyne Accad (1993), *Des femmes, des hommes, et la guerre: fiction et réalité* (Paris: Cote – femmes).
  9. Nour, *kitab ghayr dawry likitabat almar'a alarabiya* (A Non-Periodical Book of Arab Women's Writings), Winter 2000, *almar'a allubnaniya fi muwajahat alihtilal alisra'ili* (Lebanese Women in the Face of Israeli Occupation).
  10. Waddah Charara (1993), 'maqalat alharb fi mawdi' alsirr ' (War as a secret), in *alwahad nafsahu* (The Individual Himself) (Beirut: Dar al-Jadid), p. 19.
  11. Anicée al Amine Merhi (2000), 'alrafiqat wal akhawat' (Comrades and sisters), in *Lebanese Women in the Face of Israeli Occupation*, Nour, Winter 2000, p. 15.
  12. *An-Nahar*, 4 June 1984, p. 5.
  13. Samar Bashir, *altadakhhol alnafs-ijtima'i lil takhfif minal hidad wa atharuhu lada alusar* (Psycho-social Intervention to Mitigate Mourning and its Impact on Families), MA thesis (2007–8), supervised by Dr Anicée al Amine Merhi, Lebanese University, International Organisation for Migration and UNICEF.
  14. Sheikh Jaafar al-Naqdi (1998), *hayat alsayyida zeinab* (Life of The Lady Zeinab) (Arabic) (Beirut: al-A'lami Press), p. 36.
  15. al-Naqdi, *hayat alsayyida zeinab*, p. 72.
  16. Sneifer, *alqaitu alsilah, imra'ah fi khadam alharb allubnaniya*, p. 46.
  17. Salma al Khadra al Jayussi 'masseer alra'idat' (The destiny of Women Pioneers) in *mourour mi'at 'am 'ala tahrir almar'a alarabiyya* (A Hundred Years After the Liberation of Arab Women), Proceedings of the Conference held in Cairo, 23–28 October 1999 (Cairo: *almajlis ala'la lil thiqafa*, The Higher Council of Culture), p. 54.
  18. Anicée al Amine Merhi (1982), *La nouvelle femme chiite: difficultes referecielles et situation conflictuelles*, doctoral thesis, under the direction of Claude Revault d'Allonnes, Université de Paris 7, Laboratoire de Psychologie Sociale Clinique, Paris.
  19. Anicée al Amine Merhi (2005), 'Femme moderne et chiite', in Chawki Azouri and Elisabeth Roudinesco (eds), *La psychanalyse dans le monde Arabe et Islamique* (Beirut: l'Université Saint

Joseph), pp. 135–41.

20. ‘*Ashoura*’ is the tenth day of the Islamic calendar and the date of the martyrdom of Imam al Hussein. It is commemorated annually by the Shi‘a community in a variety of mourning rituals.

21. Khoueiry, ‘Autobiography’, p. 392.

22. Jacques Lacan (1975), *Le Seminaire XX, Encore* (Paris: Edition du Seuil), p. 45.

## CHAPTER 23

# The Role of Feminist Movements in Establishing Peace and Improving the Condition of Women in Areas of Armed Conflict\*

*Amira Yousef al-Badri\*\**

### **Feminism and Arab feminist movements**

Modern women's movements have been characterized by an increase in the number of independent organizations that anchor themselves in international legal references, and uphold ideologies that rest on equality and justice between the sexes, thus complementing the discourses, visions and struggles of the women's movements in the first half of the twentieth century. This increase has gone hand-in-hand with a similar increase in extremist fundamentalist religious movements that have made the fight against women's rights the focus of their activities.

That period was also characterized by several international conferences that focused on gender issues, and had a considerable impact on the development of women's movements, and the adoption by several countries in the region of the discourse on women's empowerment, the promotion of their participation in political life and their role in development. It also saw the appearance of several currents with contradictory views, values and programmes, including a number of classic social movements based on liberal and democratic principles with all their modern implications, such as ensuring the individual's social and economic rights.

Various measures and activities by women therefore had a significant impact on convening successive international conferences, in the 1980s and 1990s, particularly the Fourth International Conference on Women (Beijing,

1995) that had considerable impact on the development of the Arab women's movement, by helping it crystallize its activist vision and strategy, not to mention its impact on official government policies.

The Beijing Conference was extremely significant internationally, regionally and for the Arab region specifically, due to its international action plan that delineated 12 objectives aimed at raising women's standards. The Conference also called on governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector and civil society to take all necessary measures to ensure gender equality, and the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

On the governmental Arab and regional levels, a series of institutions and bodies were established to implement different programmes and agreements, including the Arab League's 'Arab Women Organization', and the 'Arab Women's Committee', an offshoot of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), a regional arm of the United Nations.

On the non-governmental level, the General Arab Women's Union kept building up its networks, including the Centre of Arab Women for Training and Research (CAWTAR), the Council of Arab Business Women, the Arab Network for Women in Science and Technology, and other non-governmental and regional organizations and bodies. The latter use different means to ensure the implementation of international agreements, each according to its particular field of activities, including a conference on 'Arab Women Ten Years after Beijing', the 'Arab Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women' and the 'United Arab Action Programme for Women'.

In the 1980s, thanks to the efforts of academics and activists, such as Balqis Badri, and individuals interested in women's issues going back to the early eighteenth century,<sup>1</sup> the feminist movement in Sudan began focusing on women's issues from a variety of angles and perspectives. Among these is an academic feminism that integrated gender concepts, practices and feminist theories in governmental and non-governmental development organizations, as well as in university curricula to establish new academic specializations. In the meantime, other feminist organizations active in civil society worked directly to improve women's conditions, and attend to their problems and issues through awareness-raising campaigns and convincing



arguments. They designed programmes that specifically target the integration of gender in sustainable development projects and national strategies, and tried to ensure the implementation of international agreements and conventions on women to narrow the gender gap, and end gender-based violence and discrimination.

Over the past 20 years, in light of the unfolding political and social changes in the country, the Sudanese feminist movement adopted a new strategy commensurate with its particular objectives that focuses on empowering and helping vulnerable women in conflict areas. Civil society organizations set up several programmes to assist and empower women, and designed comprehensive development programmes that focus on conflict resolution and the establishment of peace in afflicted areas.

## **The situation of Sudanese women in areas of armed conflict**

The social and economic condition of women did not improve significantly after the peace agreement was signed in 2005, especially in the remote conflict regions of Darfur and the south. Several international organizations published reports on the current situation in Darfur, among which is a 2005 report showing that around 2,794,000 persons migrated to large cities in their home provinces, and the rest to other provinces, and that Darfur women migrated more often than southern women. The reason is that Darfur men migrated to other provinces in search of work and trade opportunities, particularly to Khartoum Province, before the looting and armed conflict began. However, because Darfur women are known to be active in agriculture and trade, the armed conflict did not only affect their very presence in the province, it also put their lives in jeopardy and prevented them from trading and being productive. This dangerously affected their standard of living, impaired children's education, and led to a marked stagnation in their health and security conditions.<sup>2</sup>

Between 2003 and 2007, the security situation in Darfur witnessed several waves of violence and armed conflict between agricultural and pastoral tribes, and between tribes of African origin in the province's western region and tribes of Arab origin in the northern region. Women from all regions of Darfur have suffered from the instability, fear and terror of the *janjaweed* gangs that burn villages, murder and rape women, abduct children of both sexes, and steal animals and crops.<sup>3</sup>

Reports also show that 30 per cent of Darfur's refugee camp areas receive primary health care services, a ratio that increased to 50 per cent in 2006 before dropping to 31 per cent in 2007, due to the deteriorating security situation and the departure of many international organizations from the Province. Studies also show that among the most common forms of violence against women are rape, sexual harassment and cross-border human trafficking, and that women are threatened and raped when they go out in groups to remote areas in search of firewood and water.

Studies on female rape victims reveal that 50 per cent of them sought treatment at health centres, 30 per cent used traditional treatment methods, and the rest considered the matter too personal, and that seeking treatment would stigmatize them socially. However, despite these centres' success in serving many regions in Darfur and raising awareness on the consequences of violence, they were unable to continue their work for two reasons: their sources of funding dried up; and communications in the region proved exceedingly difficult.

Studies also show that women suffer from depression, social isolation, insomnia and social stigma, and that over 100,000 of them received some form of care at a centre run by national, governmental, non-governmental or international organizations. On the other hand, 30 per cent of women affected in 2005 had access to services,<sup>4</sup> a ratio that rose to 50 per cent in 2006, and these include economic empowerment training on specific skills that allow women to support themselves.<sup>5</sup> Other occupations include traditional crafts like making pastas, soap, sauce, earthenware and leather products, and various handicrafts, such as baskets, trays, jewellery and carpets made of animal hair.

The centres also offer a wide range of activities, including awareness-raising programmes that address coping with violence, vulnerability and deprivation of one's human rights.

Illiteracy among women is still on the rise, reaching 92.3 per cent in 2007, and 23 per cent of primary school level girls refuse to go to school, and have thus lost the chance to join the public education system. The main reasons are the distances they have to travel from home to school, and lack of personal safety that puts girls in danger of being raped on their way to or from school. Furthermore, a number of schools were closed for an entire school year for lack of security, especially in the conflict regions of western and southern Darfur, and the upper Nile and Bahr el-Ghazal regions in the

south. Surveys also show that, overall, 43.8 per cent of girls do not attend school and that illiteracy among women has continued to climb, reaching 93.4 per cent in the south.<sup>6</sup>

Local, national and United Nations organizations are still working hard to provide education services by different means, including mobile education in nomadic and camp areas, intensive education in refugee and temporary camps, and seasonal education for itinerant agricultural workers of both sexes. The well-qualified professionals and experts in rural and remote education who work for these organizations are deployed in all affected regions to prevent a further increase of illiteracy among women.

We therefore see most feminist networks and societies playing a role in raising women's cultural and social standards. For example, the al-Sabah Charitable Organisation and Ahlamlil-Salam Organisation, which work in close cooperation with local and private feminist societies in western and central Darfur, provide temporary relief assistance that helped empower around 2,540 women.<sup>7</sup>

## **Sudanese women's role in the peace agreements**

Sudanese rural and urban women play an active role in conflict resolution among tribe members and in society at large, and in traditional rural societies a system known as *hakkama* (wise adjudicator) is still practised. The *hakkama* is a woman known for her wisdom and leadership qualities, especially among women, who serves as intermediary between men and women, and attends to women's issues in towns and villages. When asked to do so, she remains in contact with village and tribal elders to discuss social issues in general and women's issues in particular.

The *hakkama* always knows what is going on in terms of tribal feuds and armed robberies in various regions of Darfur. As we know, rivalry, control of natural resources due to the scarcity of resources and lack of adequate planning in rural development, and the settlement of nomadic groups, are the main causes of conflict among tribes.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, rivalry and conflict over resources and use of land good for settlement are two of the main reasons for the armed robberies and the infighting that result in people's migrating to safer areas in the same or a neighbouring province. Families cross the border into neighbouring countries to the west to escape the

fighting and its aftermath, which includes theft, rape, sexual violations and torture.<sup>9</sup>

The *sultana*, the name given to the *hakkama* in southern Sudan, plays an important intermediary role, and takes part in discussions and conflict resolution efforts between families and individuals within and among the tribes. She organizes women to take part in meetings, alongside men and the tribal chief, in order to find solutions to personal problems and others that concern the tribe as a whole. The *hakkama* tries to entrench the notions of peace and tolerance among the tribe's members through nightly storytelling and poetry during migration and agricultural seasons. With the help of other women, she gathers the children and the young men and women to hear epic stories and songs about chivalry and courage, designed to enlighten them and teach them the customs and values of chivalry and tolerance in conflict, and spread the spirit of tolerance in times of war.

But where is the *hakkama* and women's role in all the conflicts that destroyed the country's traditional social and economic infrastructure, and adversely affected social stability and solidarity in Darfur and the south?

What will the role of women in these areas be now that the areas' inhabitants are scattered all over the country? What will happen to the women who were unable to flee?

Sudanese women's voices are being increasingly heard in several local, regional and international forums, and people now recognize their important role in the prevention of armed conflict and violence. They also recognize their mediation role, their efforts at peace-making to rebuild society after the war and their initiative in spreading the culture of peace among all social strata. Women are always busy looking for solutions to issues linked to peace-building, including removing children from the army and reintegrating them in society, mitigating tendencies towards militarism and disarmament, and encouraging efforts towards sustainable economic, social, environmental and political development.

Well-established women's organizations in conflict areas used novel methods to protest against violence, displacement and destruction; they wore black, used their bodies as shields to make their voices heard, organized street demonstrations, erected peace camps and held walks for peace. Contributions by feminist activists, whether in protest or support, were clearly evident through the feminist movement's international contacts

with organizations that seek peace among the tribes, and between politically and ethnically divided factions.

Civil society and international organizations have exerted great efforts, and still do, to address and improve women's condition in refugee camps. New specialized civil society networks focusing on three complementary objectives have been established, and these are: rescuing women and mitigating the impact of violence against them and their children; rehabilitating and empowering women economically and socially; and increasing women's role in organized political activities and unions.

Several women's societies were formed based on the above strategic objectives, including the Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace and the Darfur Women's Society. A number of specialized societies, working on specific issues like raising women's standard of living, were established by feminist activists in conflict areas, including the Women's Renaissance Movement in the Nuba Mountains, the Bajawiya Women's Society in the east, the Ahlam Peace Society in Darfur and the Southern Women's Society for Peace. In addition, the highly effective Sudanese Women's General Union has succeeded in opening several branches throughout the country.

As far as the analysis of women's situation in Darfur and the south is concerned, here are some relevant indicators.

## **The role of the Sudanese women's networks in peace-building**

The Sudanese Women's Peace Network was established in 1997 thanks to efforts by women activists and academics, and partial support from the Dutch government. Five different groups were formed, four of which represent southern women who live in Nairobi and Sudan, and the groups are either independent or affiliated to a given political current that gives each of them its name. Examples of these are the Democratic Group, the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Sudan Group, the Non-Partisan Women's Group and the Women's Voice for Peace Group. The fifth group, the Sudanese Women Associations for Peace Network, is made up of women of different backgrounds living in Khartoum Province, and gathers under its wing a number of charitable and private societies that oppose war and work for peace. The group also brings under its wing unions affiliated with different parties, known as the National Democratic Association for Peace, and the National Action Group for Peace, the latter representing

women from the government sector. These five groups formulate unified programmes with a common vision and activities to help women and children affected by war in the south and other refugee areas, particularly in the Khartoum and Omdurman areas. Today, the Sudanese Women's Peace Network focuses on the establishment of peace in Darfur.

In 2001, three other groups established the Sudanese Women Empowerment for Peace Network and registered it at the Humanitarian Affairs Commission. The Network has three branches today: the Nuba Mountains Society for the Protection of Peace; the South Sudan Feminist Society for the Preservation of Peace; and its main branch in Khartoum.

The Network's vision and message rests on the search for peace, equality, justice and freedom for Sudanese women, principles it tries to actualize through programmes that empower women through leadership training. The message embodies the important role that modern feminism can play in establishing and protecting peace, so that comprehensive and sustainable development can continue uninterrupted.<sup>10</sup> The Network is also keen to actualize its important message by empowering women and developing their potential within the context of gender equality. It thus planned, executed and monitored joint projects with other women's societies interested in peace issues, especially in women's role in peace-building, through its network of regional and international relations, and through research and documentation on women and peace, women and human rights, and women, democracy and freedom.

The Network carried out a series of activities and projects based on its objectives and message, and these can be summarized as follows:

1. taking part in the Nifasha Protocol (peace agreements) in 2003;
2. taking part in the Maastricht Declaration to establish the 'Sudanese Women for Peace Centre' in 2000;
3. contributing to the introduction of qualitative changes to all peace programmes and policies; the Network presented a comprehensive report at the 2005 Oslo 'A Climate of Peace' Conference, in preparation for the international conference on women's inclusion and empowerment in the Sudanese peace process;
4. taking an active part in appraising the initial moves for peace;
5. taking part in United Nations activities for peace and its aftermath, especially in programmes that spread the culture of peace through its

- daily activities in refugee areas;
6. training of trainers to work on spreading the culture of peace, democratic reform, conflict resolution and human rights principles through ongoing cooperation with civic and local organizations, and student unions at universities in various provinces, mainly in Darfur, the Nuba Mountains, Kasla, the Blue Nile and Bahr el-Ghazal; and
  7. implementing several projects in conflict areas, especially in Darfur and the south, including seminars, debates, interviews and intensive training workshops on gender, armament, migration, repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation and reconstruction; their projects also include efforts to end violence against women and children, and integrate the notions of gender and peace in major development policies.

Based on the above examples, it is clear that Sudanese women have a great deal of intellectual, political and leadership potential that allows them to organize themselves in networks with a unified vision and message. These comprise several programmes and activities that come to the aid of vulnerable and deprived women, and try to improve their condition in a vast country that suffers from instability, poverty and an excess of weaponry. However, despite all these efforts that represent an entirely new trend in feminist activism, the country's political situation has compelled these movements to adopt a new track, namely the pursuit of peace and democracy.

However, the contradictory visions of different feminist organizations are but a reflection of the prevailing situation in the country, and the state's role in damaging their efforts. These contradictions are due to the nature of the regime in power and to war, conflicts, social change and the absence of democracy that transforms the feminist movement's discourse into a religious conservative discourse that does not reflect the circumstances and needs of women. We thus see women's organizations and groups that share the same vision unable to form additional groups to effect the desired changes, due to the security measures applied against any collective action opposed to the state. Even if some networks did succeed in holding a number of activities, their movements were often tightly controlled and restricted.

The absence of these groups from the Machakos Protocol, in 2002, is a disturbing indicator for the women's movement, and should be promptly rectified; and despite women's best efforts at the time, the Protocol failed to include them or refer to their role in reaching an agreement. Women reacted strongly to that and several political personalities and women's organizations stressed the need for a civil constitution that protects the rights of women, and ensures equality among all citizens. They insisted on the need to establish a democratic system in the country that prioritizes conflict areas in matters of peace and development. A memorandum by a number of southern women living in the north underlined the importance of participating, alongside their northern sisters, in the political process and efforts to promote democracy.

### **Difficulties and challenges facing the women's movement in its effort to end conflict and establish peace**

Despite their qualitative and quantitative growth, the Sudanese women's movements have faced a number of problems throughout their existence, especially in recent years. They are still stymied by difficulties and challenges that limit their aspirations and prevent them from achieving their objectives. Some of these problems are as follows:

1. The indicators used to measure the general progress of Sudanese women, and in particular that of women in conflict areas: most studies like to highlight the indicators that show women's participation levels in the political, parliamentary and leadership domains, and neglect those relevant to the social and economic domains, such as the right to education, shelter, nutrition, employment and health. What good is it to have women parliamentarians who lead a drive to restrict women's freedom and obstruct their efforts to achieve their human rights? And what good is it to have a woman minister who supports harmful social practices and helps enact unfair laws to solve her own problems?
2. The scarcity of women leaders, which is due to the absence of democracy and low levels of awareness and political participation among rural citizens and young women. It is also due to a lack of awareness about the specifics of a balanced growth, and its social impact on rural women and refugee areas, especially in the east, west



and south of the country, which helped stymie the crystallization of women's activities. The absence of a forward-looking national dialogue among women's groups and political leaders has sidelined women from public life, and led to divisions inside the women's movement.

3. The failure of education curricula to shed light on the women's movement: highlighting the role of women would help spread awareness among young people on the importance of the feminist movement's role in finding solutions to women's issues, raising their standard of living and promoting their role in the processes of sustainable development.
4. The difficulty in building up cadres of women activists, with the required technical, administrative and leadership experience, in the labour force.
5. The impact of poverty and war on the participation of rural women in development, due to their daily struggle for survival that prevents them from benefiting from opportunities that would allow them to be active in public life.
6. The lack of funds, and the difficulty in finding sustainable sources of income to help keep the wheels of small women's studies, programmes and projects turning in conflict and refugee areas.
7. The paucity of statistics on the number of women and girls affected by conflict, and the nature and degree of the harm done to them.

## **Recommendations**

1. Establish institutions in areas of conflict and war that look after the interests of women and encourage them to participate in public life.
2. Promote, develop and activate a national strategy and measures to improve the condition of women.
3. Encourage the peace agreements' direct support of women's issues, and the integration of women as a main element in the decision-making and political planning processes, and bring violence and armed conflict to an end.
4. Increase the material and leadership support for women's national and local societies and networks, and raise their levels of awareness.

5. Increase the number of training workshops on gender and on the importance of women's role in development, and make them accessible to all levels and cadres in both the public and private domains.
6. Ensure the implementation of CEDAW, especially women's equality with men in education, employment, public appointments and political action.
7. Ensure that women get their fair share of parliamentary seats (25 per cent) and participate in the general elections.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Ahfad University for Women, Umdurman, Sudan.

1. See Hajja Kashif Badri (2002), *alharaka alnissa'iyah fi alsudan* (The Women's Movement in Sudan) (Khartoum: University of Khartoum Press).

2. Adam el-Zein (2005), *alsalaam wa altanmiah fi Darfur* (Peace and Development in Darfur) (Khartoum: almatba'at alhadithat).

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid.

5. Magda Abdallah Ibrahim (2006), *athar alniza' fi darfur 'ala almar'a almunijah* (The Impact of the Conflict in Darfur on Productive Women), Master's thesis on gender and development, Ahfad University, Omdurman.

6. UNCHR report, 2007.

7. UNDP (2008) Project initiative, 'Fighting for peace: Hakamas in Darfur'.

8. Manzol Assal (2004), *Displaced Persons in Khartoum: Current Realities and Post War Scenarios* (Cairo: Population Council).

9. Ibrahim, *athar alniza' fi darfur 'ala almar'a almunijah*.

10. Amnah Rahma (2007), *'dawr almar'a fi fad alniza'at fi darfur'* (The role of women in resolving the conflict in Darfur), *alnisa'* magazine (Omdurman: The Baker Badri Scientific Society for Women's Studies).

## Further reading

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- Rahmah, Amnah (2007), '*dawr almar'a fi fad alniza'at fi darfur*' (The role of women in resolving the conflict in Darfur), *alnisa'* magazine (Omdurman: The Baker Badri Scientific Society for Women's Studies).
- Rahmah, Amnah (2007), *The Role of Women in Conflict Resolution in Darfur: Women Bulletin* (Omdurman: The Baker Badri Scientific Society for Women's Studies).
- The Women's Movement in Sudan (2005), *Report on the Condition of Arab Women* (Beirut: The Women's Centre, Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)).
- al-Zein, Adam (2005), *AlSalam wa'l Tanmiya fi Darfur* (Peace and Development in Darfur) (Khartoum: al-haditha Press).

## CHAPTER 24

### Terrorizing Masculinities and Ambivalent Responses in Wajdi Mouawad's *Scorched*

*Dina Georgis\**

This chapter turns to aesthetic cultural production for its capacity to provide insight into the meanings of masculinities in war and conflict zones. With a focus on the Lebanese Civil War (and Palestine as it connects to Lebanese political history of conflict), I propose that a psychoanalytically informed aesthetic lens gives us access to the complexities that underpin masculinity and masculine responses in volatile political contexts that are working through the legacies of colonial histories. Aesthetic production provides a playing field for unprocessed affects – the space to represent unassimilated historic trauma. In other words, aesthetic representations ‘disclose’ difficult to digest dynamics. As an experience, aesthetics offers an encounter with the legacies of traumas, which return in constructions of masculine identities and ideologies. As such, the aesthetic provides a fertile ground for gender research in conflict zones.

While prevailing feminist analysis on war has examined masculinity's investment in power, possession and violence, a glimpse into the aesthetic archive might allow us to understand violent masculinities beyond the seduction or social constructions of power. It might allow us to see masculine strategies in political conflicts as emotional strategies in response to the difficulties of colonial legacies. Indeed, it might permit us to see the humanity of men in war. This approach demands that we recognize that aesthetic cultural texts have an emotional source and that ‘being touched’ by the effect of historic injuries might teach us how to become better readers of our time. In this way, this chapter makes an intervention into

political discourses of war by creating new conditions for conversation and insights.

Typically, feminists examine the impact of war on women: how they become the transmitters of nations in political conflict, how they become symbols of loss of homeland, and how their bodies become sites of battle and conquest when they are assaulted and raped.<sup>1</sup> While it is understandable why feminism has privileged the ‘oppression of women’, it has sidestepped the impact of war on men and has thus not attended to the injuries of men in war. Such conceptual approaches also foreclose the ways in which violent masculinity leaves its trace on women’s identities, beliefs and everyday practices. By examining the psychic and emotional implications of gender in war, my aim is not to excuse or justify the violences of masculinity, but to reach deeper insights into how historic traumas are enacted in war and how those enactments are highly gendered.

What is very much at stake in war and the responses to the trauma of war, as Judith Butler has argued, is human vulnerability. ‘Undone’ by loss, political responses to conflict are often reaction formations from the destabilizing effects of injury.<sup>2</sup> This is true especially with the struggles that have led to devastating conflicts, such as the ones we are seeing in Palestine and Israel, Iraq and Lebanon, because evident in each of these struggles are the traumatic legacies of troubled political histories and colonialism.<sup>3</sup> Thinking and learning about histories of conflict therefore requires a new interpretive approach: one that engages with the effect of historic trauma, its nuances, conflicts and desires. Understanding war through loss suggests that people live complexly in relation to political realities and political identities.

In aesthetic production, the conditions are set to see the human side of political conflict, where behaviour is not predictable and not reducible to typical discourses of war that reproduce gendered representations of heroism, martyrdom or victimization. Aesthetic cultural production (literature, film and visual cultures in general) privileges the singularity of human experience and thus interferes with prevailing collective discourses of war. In works of art, the gaps and contradictions of difficult or traumatic experience defy such polarized and definitive renditions of human histories. Suggested here is that an ‘aesthetic reality’<sup>4</sup> is well suited for understanding the ‘emotional reality’ of war and in so doing delivers ‘the human’ in history.

Hence, while it might seem that the only solution to war is the eradication of harmful masculinity, I suggest that an ‘epistemology of love’, interested in being touched by the painful effects of subjectivities, might get us closer to that goal. In aesthetic representation, we are more able to see the human in excess of collective narratives and the closures of homogenous politically charged masculinist nationalisms. In my research, I turn to cultural representation, in its beauty and ugliness, to learn what it can teach us about how individuals are living with historic racial injury. Taking Cathy Caruth’s view that the undigested experience of trauma is embedded in literature and visual cultures,<sup>5</sup> this chapter suggests that aesthetic works are an invitation to help us think through and work through troubled histories. In aesthetic production, we are invited to enter the troubled and otherwise discarded space of woundedness. This is so because the aesthetic awakens us to loss, injury and grief when it reaches us affectively, in ways that exceed what is directly represented or known.

Montreal-based Wajdi Mouawad’s award-winning play *Scorched* (2003),<sup>6</sup> the primary aesthetic cultural text I examine in this chapter, does not represent a consoling picture of masculinity at war. But his story, which takes up the problem of terrorism, poverty and sexual violence in a young man, has a great deal to teach us about masculinity in volatile political contexts. For me, it marks, as do Rawi Hage’s novel *De Niro’s Game*<sup>7</sup> (2006) and Hani Abu-Assad’s film *Paradise Now* (2005),<sup>8</sup> all written in the Arab diaspora within a few years of one another, an epistemological opening in how to think about ‘terrorists’ in political conflicts. *Scorched* attends to the injured states of Arab masculinities and the masculine answers they reach for. Like *De Niro’s Game* and *Paradise Now*, *Scorched* is not motivated by the pressures of positive representation of Arab men in the context of present-day Western cultures of hate; instead, it asks us to consider the painful negotiations of loss of home, occupation and the ‘wasted’ lives of young men deployed into war. What separates *Scorched* from Hage’s and Abu-Assad’s texts is that its focus is not only on men, but also on how masculinity is implicated in female responses to violence. It does this not only by representing how women are ‘oppressed’ by masculinist culture, but also by demonstrating how masculinity is implicated as an injury that organizes meaning for women.

Mouawad never names the place of war in which *Scorched* is set, but all references point to Lebanon. The play begins in Montreal with Nawal

Marwan's death and the reading of the will to her adult twins, Simon and Janine, by their mother's 'friend and notary' Alphonse Lebel. The twins were brought up in Canada. Janine is a mathematician. She has chosen a career more common for men. She contains and manages her emotions with symmetry and finds consolation in equations. Simon is a boxer and the one who feels. As Janine stands silently at the reading, Simon is infuriated by the terms of his mother's will and her request to have them search for their father, whom they presumed dead from the civil war, and a brother, whom they never knew they had. Janine is nonetheless the first to take the trip to the old country to find answers and then Simon, defeated, grudgingly follows. Though their personalities contrast, Janine and Simon are both scorched by loss, confusion and anger.

The play spans over 50 years of Nawal's life, the central figure of the play. As we travel back through her life, she becomes unravelled to us and to her children. Sometimes, past and present collapse into each other seamlessly. That is because the past has a haunting presence. We meet Nawal as a young woman, as a 40-year-old, and as an elderly woman. Though time changes her, the wound from the trauma of masculine violences has a persistence, a trace that travels through time even if it is silenced. In *Scorched*, violent masculinity is not only transmitted among men, but lives in the very arteries that define family, culture and nation. Indeed, it underwrites the horror of Nawal's life, in which she also becomes implicated. In refusing to speak about the traumas of her life, the silence rages transgenerationally in her children. Silence is indeed a major motif in the play. It enacts an aggressive defence against the wound of trauma, which not only undermines healing but also keeps the injury alive in repetition from generation to generation. Conversely, Mouawad positions language and speaking as the conditions for change and ending the cycles of hate and anger.

Nawal's first encounter with violent masculinity is not with a man but with her mother. She is 14 years old, and pregnant from a pre-marital relationship with a young man named Wahab. Her mother defends a masculinist tradition that has no place for a woman's desires. She says:

Forget your belly. This child has nothing to do with you. Nothing to do with your family. Nothing to do with your mother, nothing to do with your life... Leave me, naked, with your belly and the life it is carrying. Or stay and kneel down, Nawal, kneel down.

Silenced, Nawal kneels to her mother. She gives birth to a son who is immediately taken away from her and sent to an orphanage, and later ends up in a refugee camp where he is named Nihad Harmanni. At her deathbed, Nawal's grandmother, unlike her mother, warns Nawal to refuse the conditions of her life: the trappings of poverty and illiteracy. She warns:

We... the family, the women in our family... are caught in the web of anger. We have been for ages: I was angry at my mother, and your mother is angry at me, just as you are angry at your mother. And your legacy to your daughter will be anger too. We have to break the thread. So learn to read, learn to write, learn to count, learn to speak. Learn. Then leave.<sup>9</sup>

Nawal does learn how to read and think, and comes back to write an epitaph on her grandmother's grave, as requested, but her legacy to her daughter Janine is anger.

Though Nawal does not break the transgenerational thread of feminine anger, in her it returns with a difference. Nawal becomes an educated and eloquent speaker. Indeed, she becomes a writer for a political newspaper and also teaches her travel companion Sawda how to read and write; in her turn, Sawda then teaches Nawal how to sing. But during the years that she spent searching for her son, traumatic events in Nawal's life unfold which reduce her to silence. In fact, in the last years of her life, she literally does not utter a word, not until the last day. And before that, she says nothing to her children about her life in her country. This is because when she finally meets her son, she is in prison for political crimes, and he, unbeknownst to her, is her torturer. Known as Abu Tarek in prison, not Nihad, the name given to him by his adoptive parents, her torturer son favours her, for she is the 'woman who sings', and rapes her repeatedly, calling for whore number 72. She ends up pregnant with the twins. Years later, she faces him in a courtroom, but identifies herself only as the woman who sings, whore number 72, not his mother. In a letter addressed to him as 'father' and delivered by Janine at the end of the play, Nawal condemns him and tells him the truth. But in the letter delivered by Simon, addressed to him as 'son', she speaks to him as her son and regales him with her hatred. However, Nawal is ambivalent because she also tells him that she loves him; in her words, 'where there is love, there can be no hatred. And to preserve love, I blindly chose not to speak'.<sup>10</sup> But in choosing not to speak, she loses her twins. In Janine's words:



She blinded us. Now I'm afraid of going crazy... I'm going to hang up and tumble headfirst into a world far from here, far from the strict geometry that has defined my life. I've learnt to write and count, to read and speak. Now all of that is no use.<sup>11</sup>

It could be said that Nawal refuses to bring symbolic order to the trauma of her life, while in her daughter Janine, the structure of order and geometry, though without symbolic content, has been a defence against the confusion related to her transgenerational trauma. Trauma is most certainly a crisis of knowledge, and loss of memory a defence. But more often, we remember but we simply cannot make sense of how the event has changed us. Language fails. But despite the failure of language, the effect of loss always finds expression in representation, even if it is an enigmatic elaboration of the event. Hence traumatic experience has a paradoxical relationship to narrative, which both conceals and reveals it. Having put so much faith in language and learning, did knowledge itself fail Nawal? Perhaps silence was all she could do to survive her horror – the only means that her trauma could be symbolized without unleashing the part of her that hated her son Nihad, and without terrorizing her twins. Faithful to her grandmother's wish, Nawal, in the end, did create the conditions for her children to find and write their own histories, and perhaps even work through the injuries she had inflicted upon them.

Inclusion in knowledge production has been a fundamental feminist goal. But knowledge and language does not necessarily help us make sense or work through injury. Sometimes the stories we tell to make sense of injury become hardened in narrative fixities or narrative solutions to trauma that resist change. Perhaps silence gave Nawal safety in the midst of horror. Unable either to love or hate her son, Nawal survives in silent limbo. Considering what might be the political work of loss, Esther Sánchez-Pardo suggests that we learn to integrate love and hate, to reach, in Melanie Klein's terms, the depressive position.<sup>12</sup> If the lost object is a son, or even a nation, then what Klein called the paranoid-schizoid state, which wants to fragment and split the world into good and evil, suggests that we are either in a nostalgic or romantic relationship to the lost object or in resistance to it altogether.<sup>13</sup> *Scorched* in my view takes the view that violent masculinity is to be loved. Mouawad's play, written in post 9/11 culture, does this by refusing a Manichean splitting prevalent in contemporary discourses of terrorism that produce men as either heroes or monsters. In *Scorched*,

masculinity's horrors, which conjure and respond to present-day Western views of the 'Arab terrorist', are not reducible to either characterization.

This is not an easy task. To many, these days, terrorists are resistant fighters gone awry: abject and crazy. So how do we humanely, ethically, lovingly represent the terrorist? How might their actions be understood as their particular story of colonial survival? I suggest that we return to Frantz Fanon, who not only offered an anti-colonial critique, but also asked that we attend to the psychology of the colonized in response to the violence of colonial regimes that differentiated groups as more or less inferior, more or less civilized against European culture. The dehumanizing and injurious implication of this discourse, in Fanon's words, is that the black man, or the colonized man, is not a man.<sup>14</sup> Taken to its extreme, this logic strips and objectifies his individuality, and he is reduced to his body and, more precisely, a body part: 'He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis,' says Fanon.<sup>15</sup> Though Fanon did not examine the gendered violence that often results from racial humiliation, the evidence is indisputable.

Mouawad's play gives us an emotional and psychological lens into Nawal's son, who is, metaphorically speaking, also a violent penis. 'Abu Tarek' is the torturer, the face and body of violent masculinity cultivated to torture and implicitly allowed to violate women. But 'Nihad' is the son who was wounded by terrorizing masculinity itself. After four years at the orphanage, some fighters, avenging the death of three of their own, captured him and the other children and took them to the camps. We can surmise that the cycles of revenge played out here are between the Christian Lebanese and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). For the 'camps' could only be Palestinian camps given the context. And the orphanage, we can surmise, is Christian in light of the nature of religious symbolism and devotion expressed by Nawal and her family. Nihad was likely born into a Christian Lebanese family and raised by Palestinian parents living in the refugee camps. Trained to be a fighter by a father figure, about whom we know little, Nihad learns how to use a gun, but then one day he leaves to search for his mother. When he cannot find her, 'he had no more meaning',<sup>16</sup> in the words of Chamseddine. He becomes a sniper, and a good one, but a sniper without a cause: he collects pictures of the people he kills. Eventually, he is picked up by (presumably) a Lebanese militia, likely the Phalange, who train him to be a torturer. Mouawad's Nihad behaves monstrously but is seemingly not motivated by the ideological beliefs of

any of the militia groups, which remain unnamed in the play. Perhaps this is so because what incites Nihad's violence is not politics. The war seems to have conveniently provided him the conditions to act out his traumas of loss in violence. We the audience, like the mother he Oedipally rapes, are asked to be attuned to his traumas and his humanity, which is to say his brokenness, his childlike dependency and his injuries.

In *Scorched*, Nihad symbolically stands for the masculine subject who terrorizes; but if we look deeper, we also find a terrorized subjectivity. He is not unlike the Palestinians and other men in the global south whose collective responses to the injuries of European colonialism, present-day imperialism and occupation have produced violent masculinist cultures of resistance, which in turn have the effect of injuring their own people: men and women. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon's solution to the psychologically injurious effects of European colonization and its denigrating mark on post-colonial bodies was to provide post-colonial people with national (Oedipal) fathers that they could revere, and with whom they could have appropriate identification. In Lebanon, however, identification with France, its colonizer, remains prevalent among the Christians. This legacy of colonialism, what Fanon called the colonial 'white mask', is implicated in the internal struggles that led to the civil war among Christians and Muslims and the conflicts with the displaced Palestinians in Lebanon. Without going into detail about how religion and the Palestinian struggle has played out in Lebanon, suffice it to say that in all of the Middle East, religion has over-determined national liberation projects. They have promised group authenticity against the violences of European colonialism and present-day imperial interferences. Indeed, the nationalist/religious fathers that have emerged post-Fanon, in the Middle East and beyond, have in some cases led to ethnic cleansing and in all cases have perpetuated women's oppression. In other words, they have not met up to Fanon's dream for post-colonial 'healing' and change.

Hage's, Hani Abu-Assad's and Mouawad's works are all critiques of emergent post-colonial/nationalist/religious fathers. Perhaps what they are problematizing is consistent with Joseph Massad's argument about the state of masculinity in the region. In Palestine, he argues, masculinity has been endowed with a nationalist agency that aims to traditionalize the nation. Up until 1948, Palestinian identity was defined in terms of those living in Palestine, the so-called motherland. But after 1948, this shifts. Article 4 of

the Palestinian National Charter defines Palestinian identity as anyone born to a Palestinian father. With the 'rape' of the land in 1948 by the Zionists, identity, argues Massad, now becomes transmitted from fathers to sons. The mother, in other words, takes a back seat to the nationalist project.<sup>17</sup> In *De Niro's Game*, *Paradise Now* and *Scorched*, the male protagonists are all ambivalent towards the new 'laws of the father'. In Nihad, this is expressed in his refusal to pay allegiance to any of the symbolic fathers of the sectarian groups. Nihad kills and rapes without any loyalty to paternal law. Indeed, the various militia groups harness his masculine aggression and exploit his masculinized injuries, for their own agendas. Masculinity is in effect deployed in the service of the nation. Men become thugs to protect the beloved land. But herein is the paradox of masculinity, according to Homi Bhabha: masculinity is service.<sup>18</sup> Thugs and terrorists might be thought of as the domestic labour of political struggle. And this renders even the most invested in the laws of the father ambivalent.

In *Scorched*, Nihad's ambivalent relationship with the nation is suggestive of the instability of nationalized masculinity. The fissures and gaps of identification express how people respond to power in excess of what power demands. Aesthetic production provides us with the conditions to experience this paradox and to do the work of understanding men and women as 'whole' people, neither 'good' nor 'bad', neither wholly victims nor wholly perpetrators: it is the work of seeing and accepting the human as a profoundly ambivalent creature. Indeed, Mouawad's play invokes empathy despite its very grisly representation of men in war. Or perhaps it invokes empathy for the very reason that it symbolizes the affective tensions between terrorizing masculinity and terrorized masculinity. By aesthetically and affectively expressing this paradox, it restores the humanity of all.

## Notes

\* University of Toronto, Canada.

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2. Judith Butler (2004), *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso), p. 23.

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## CHAPTER 25

### The Child Torn Between War and the Adult World: *In the Battlefields* by Danielle Arbid\*

#### *Dalia Said Mustafa\*\**

This chapter analyses and critiques the image of the child Lina in the 2004 film *ma'arik hub* (In the Battlefields) by Lebanese director Danielle Arbid. I will discuss the significance of choosing a girl at the threshold of adolescence – Lina is 12 years old – to shed light on her shaky and uncertain sense of identity during the years of the Lebanese Civil War. In most of the film's scenes, the camera follows Lina's gaze, or focuses on her point of view, through her facial expressions and the positions she takes, to convey to the audience how extremely difficult it is for her to identify her sexual and class identities as a member of a broken Christian bourgeois family.

The Arab feminist cinema has not so far addressed (either in its content or through critique and analysis) the *girl's* perception of what is going on around her or her impact on it as she reflects and spies on the adult world. Tunisian director Moufida Tlatli's two films, *samt alqussur* (Silences of the Palaces, 1996) and *mawsim alrijal* (The Season of Men, 2000), are probably among the most important feminist films in this domain, since they paved the way for a trend in Arab cinema that exposes the issues and thoughts of an adolescent girl by means of a cinematic language that challenges the taboos, as far as the female world is concerned, and poses questions that contradict and denude masculine thought.

Does *In the Battlefields* add new dimensions to this trend? I believe that the most important thing the film does is try to discover what goes on in Lina's life and imagination regarding her own sexual, social and class

identity, through her relationship with the maid Siham on the one hand, and her bourgeois family on the other.

After discussing certain theoretical trends in feminism, childhood and cinema, I will end the chapter with a number of ideas and questions on the progress achieved by Arab cinema in conveying the image of childhood in general, and in particular depicting it in a cinematic feminist language. Can we say that we have in the Arab world a cinematic feminist current interested in filming both children, boys and girls, and their imagination? And, what is the significance of choosing a girl as a cinematic symbol, or motif?

Danielle Arbid belongs to the new generation of the contemporary Lebanese cinema, which includes directors such as Joanna Hajji Touma, Khalil Joreige, Nadine Labaki, Ziad Doueiri, Michel Kamoun and Samir Habashi, who are trying to revive Lebanese cinema using techniques newer than those used before and during the civil war.<sup>1</sup> Important regular cinematographic events currently take place in Lebanon, among which is the annual *nama fi beyrout* (Made in Beirut Festival) which began in 2001, the Beirut Film Festival, *ayam beirut alcinemai'ya* (Cinema Days in Beirut), and a Documentary Film Festival. A greater number of Lebanese films are produced in Lebanon than abroad, and Arbid is one of the founders and organizers of *nama fi beyrout*, in which both her documentary and feature films have been shown. At the 2002 festival she showed a documentary entitled *hudood* (Frontiers), and at the 2003 festival she showed *balbala fi alsalon* (Conversation de Salon). *Maarek hob* (In the Battlefield), whose story and script she wrote, opened the 2004 festival and was very well received by the press. The film, a Lebanese–French–Belgian production, won the main prize in 2004 for the best feature film at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris, before being shown at the Made in Beirut Festival. In 2007, Arbid produced her second feature film: *rajul da'i* (The Lost Man).

## **Lina's torn identity**

The story of *In the Battlefields* takes place in the early 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War, and revolves around the friendship between Lina (played by Marianne Feghali), the girl on the threshold of adolescence and member of a bourgeois Christian family, and Siham (played by Rawiya al-

Chab), an attractive young woman, a few years older than Lina, who is the family maid. The film portrays different aspects of the relationship between the two girls: a friendship that allows them to share their secrets and thoughts, and especially their relationship with men. It is also a relationship of needs; Siham needs Lina to make it easier for her to leave the house in order to meet her lover, and Lina finds in Siham a way out of the restrictive family atmosphere, and of the emptiness and boredom of the war. Lina's large family is made up of her parents, her rich and domineering aunt, Yvonne (played by Loudi Arbid Nasr), her uncle, his wife and his children, all of whom live in the same building. Thus, the details of their lives are meshed together, as are their household secrets. We see, for example, that despite their need for her financial assistance, everyone in the family hates and resents the domineering aunt, for whom Siham works. We also see the deep chasm between Lina's parents: her father is addicted to gambling and her pregnant mother is crushed, and has no idea how to deal with her husband. She leaves the house, only to return a short time later. In the end he is killed. Lina and Siham find in their friendship an escape from the suffocating atmosphere of the adults, and join forces against it and its repressive values.

In an interview, Arbid said that she used the war as a metaphor of the interior war between people that live in this family, adding that the war inside was far crueller and more violent than the war outside. She also said that these images were inspired by her own experience and life with her family during the Lebanese Civil War. The war outside, she said, is waged against everybody, while the war inside is waged only against girls.<sup>2</sup> She said that although she does not consider herself a feminist, and does not adopt a feminist perspective, she tried to focus in her film on the 'I' in both men and women, with its good and its evil.

Yet, although Arbid does not adopt a specifically feminist perspective in her film, she succeeds in presenting a number of important feminist viewpoints by focusing on the relationship between Lina and Siham, on the one hand, and between Lina and her family, especially her mother, on the other. The film shows us that Lina is attracted to Siham's sexually liberated world, in which Siham expresses her feelings and desires through sex. Lina accompanies Siham on her rendezvous with her lover, although Siham still sees Lina as a child who understands nothing about sex. Lina, on the other hand, feels that her relationship with Siham is more than just a friendship;



she is drawn to her physically and spiritually. However, although Lina herself probably does not exactly know to what extent she is spiritually and physically attached to Siham, as the film shows us, we nevertheless start to discover this attraction, or perhaps its early signs, by the way Lina looks at Siham and their erotic physical contacts. We see early on how Lina moves her hands tenderly through Siham's hair and whispers in her ear that they are similar; 'You and I are alike,' she says. In my opinion, one of the most important images the director succeeds in highlighting is the one that shows Lina's confusion regarding her own feelings towards somebody else's body, be it a man or woman. In a couple of interviews with her after the showing of her film *The Lost Man*, Arbid revealed that she indeed enjoys filming erotic sexual scenes because of her love for both photography and drawing. Through the sexual scenes, she is able to express what she cannot through words and dialogue, which is why many of her scenes do not rely on dialogues between individuals.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Arbid's camera reinforces this style because it focuses in this film on facial expressions, skin folds, touching and sounds more than it does on words or narrative. Arbid's camera is slow, deliberate and lingering.

As for Lina's attitude regarding her relationship with her mother and father, we find that she hates her mother's weakness and negativity towards her father's behaviour, but also hates her father's frivolity, violence and addiction to gambling. In one of the scenes, Lina tells her mother 'I'm fed up with you', and when the mother decides to leave the house (to which she returns a little later), Lina chooses to stay with her father, not because she loves him but because she cannot bring herself to leave Siham. In one scene we see Lina violently push her father away when he tries to hit her, but in another, we see her comb his hair with extreme tenderness to help him fall asleep. I find it important that Arbid does not pass judgement on any of her characters, but tries instead to highlight their contradictions, weaknesses, confusion and severity, all at the same time.

## **Lina's gaze and furtive eyes**

From this perspective, I would like to discuss the importance of Lina's gaze, and the way her eyes sometimes gaze at, and at others furtively spy on, the adult world. Lina does not speak much in the film; instead, her eyes and facial expressions tell us about this young girl's feelings and desires,

and about the difficulty she has defining her own sexual and class identity. In other words, with whom does Lina identify? Does she identify with the value system of her dysfunctional and disintegrating family, or with the unrestrained freedom of Siham that the war helped her develop? Or does Lina try to create a separate imaginary world that only she and Siham can share? The audience follows the story through Lina's eyes, her gaze and her furtive look at the adult world, all at the same time, as she appears in almost all the film's scenes. Academic researcher Vicky Lebeau says in her book *Childhood and Cinema* that a child's intent gaze in cinema often serves to transmit what words, narrative or translation cannot.<sup>4</sup> In Arbid's film, therefore, Lina is a witness to all that takes place, an active player in the story's events and the audience's guide to her family and the deep contradictions that tear it apart. She is the one who invites us to imagine what life is like for a girl her age in the midst of war, and for a child whose parents are too distracted by their own troubles to pay any attention to her. She is also the one who takes us on a journey of discovery of her own strong feelings for Siham. This young girl's image, therefore, makes us wonder what future might be created for her.

Lina's personality has much in common with that of 'Alia' in Tunisian film director Moufida Tlatli's *samt alqussoor* (The Silences of the Palaces). The two girls are approximately the same age (although we get to follow the evolution of Alia's personality beyond childhood and adolescence), but in class terms, Lina is Alia's opposite. Alia is the daughter of Khadija, a servant in the great palace in which she grows up unrecognized and without a father, while Lina is the daughter of a rich family and has an intimate friendship with the servant Siham. Naturally, class plays an important role in forming the girls' respective personalities, although both Alia and Lina grow up emotionally and biologically in difficult political circumstances. Alia grows up during the Tunisian liberation movement from French occupation, and Lina grows up during the long Lebanese Civil War which she feels will never end. The war is a common concern but also a personal one – even a very personal one – as Arbid's film intimates. The Silences of the Palaces tells us a great deal about the unfolding events from Alia's perspective, while In the Battlefields tells us much about Lina's confused identity through her gaze and her actions.

What is the purpose then of using this particular technique? Feminist movements of the 1970s and 1980s in the United States and Europe were

probably the first to use the 'gaze' as a cinematic tool. This is due to the movement's huge interest in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theories, and the very important political theses they presented to counter Freud's ideas and analysis of masculinity, femininity and sex. Moreover, the feminist movement in the West remained intellectually and culturally in touch with the new theories of French philosopher and psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan on Freud's ideas, propagated through his writings and the 'Freudian school'.<sup>5</sup> Many Western feminists paid attention to Lacan's contribution to psychoanalysis because he focused on 'woman's' nature and the concept of 'femininity' from a political-cultural perspective. Lacan wrote a lot about the child's gaze, especially about what he calls the 'mirror stage', an important infantile stage because it rests on the gaze's intimate association with concepts such as identity, desire and relationship with the Other.<sup>6</sup> In my opinion, *In the Battlefields* is connected one way or another to Lacan's theory because to a large extent the film associates Lina's gaze with her confused desires and unsettled feelings towards her identity and her repressed emotions towards the Other, or what Lacan calls 'the real'. In brief, the concept of 'the real' refers to our deep-seated emotions going back to childhood, and to the fantasies in our imagination that crosses the language barrier, as we cannot express it with words.<sup>7</sup>

Cinema is of course one of the best means of expressing what goes on in our imagination and our pent-up desires, through the use of important techniques like focusing on the gaze (as in Arbid's film), and through montages, flashbacks and different camera angles. Many researchers and critics interested in cinema have analysed the so-called 'voyeurism' – that is, satisfying one's sexual desire by spying on the Other, who is usually a woman.<sup>8</sup> However, in the film *In the Battlefields*, the analysis is turned upside-down because the spy is an adolescent girl watching another female and a male together. The film's opening credits include a scene where Lina and Siham secretly watch their half-naked neighbour as he lies on his bed watching television, which is the camera's way of conveying to the audience, from the very beginning, the centrality of this theme to the film.<sup>9</sup>

In her famous article 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema',<sup>10</sup> the cinema critic and director Laura Mulvey says that using the camera to monitor the gaze as it shifts focus delineates cinema's identity, because it reveals the potential hidden in the meanings and objectives of this gaze. She

adds that this is what makes cinema's treatment of voyeurism totally different from other mediums such as striptease clubs, theatre and artistic performances.<sup>11</sup> I believe, therefore, that when the camera tails Lina's gaze in, it delineates the film's identity and makes it an innovator in the use of this particular technique. Through Lina's gaze the film becomes rife with meanings, motifs and possibilities regarding the feelings and desires borne by this gaze.

## **The child's personality as a symbol in cinema**

In light of the above, what is the importance of transmitting events in cinema using a child's personality as a conduit? Lebanese cinema in general might be more interested than any other Arab cinema in highlighting the personality of a child on the threshold of adolescence, whether boy or girl, and his or her relationship with what goes on around him or her, which is why I believe the point needs more scrutiny. We see this, for example, in Ziad Doueiri's film *bayrout algharbiya* (West Beirut, 1998), Jean Chamoun's *tayf almadinah* (In the Shadow of the City, 2000), Randa Chahal Sabbagh's *tayarah min waraq* (Paper Kite), Joseph Fares' *Zozo* (2005) and now again in *In the Battlefields*. What is it that a child can transmit but an adult cannot? In an interview with the academic researcher Lina al-Khatib, director Ziad Doueiri comments on this very point, saying:

When you make the child or adolescent utter a political statement, it carries more weight with the audience. For example, when Omar in West Beirut says what he says about Christianity, you accept it because he is an adolescent. It is a way of breaching a taboo.<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, I shall pursue some of my thoughts on the subject.

In the first place, perhaps many in the Arab world associate the girl child's image with innocence. The stereotypical image of the girl in our society, which the visual media has helped propagate and stereotype, is that of a shy individual, less rowdy and more innocent, pensive, demure and obedient than a boy. In the film *In the Battlefields*, the director totally undoes this image to slowly rebuild an opposing one: Lina is a rebellious child who disobeys her parents, and witnesses the amorous rendezvous between Siham and her lover. She is a child who sees her father's weakness and slow disintegration due to his gambling addiction and his being pursued by debt collectors, she is a child who is stuck body and soul to her class

opposite, Siham, and she is a selfish, wicked child who uses her superior class status to denounce Siham. The film therefore depicts a totally different image of the Arab child on the threshold of adolescence than the one we know. In my opinion this is an important point because, to the film's credit, it adds new dimensions to the girl's cinematic personality from a feminist perspective. Lina does more to unearth many of our fears and obsessions than she does to attract our sympathy, which is why she imposes on the adult world respect for her will and desires, and ensures that they be taken into account. Lina's rebellion against this world is a rebellion against being sidelined as a female and a child, and she does this by imposing her rules on it.

In the second place, the film focuses on the idea that the adult world is in fact very limited compared to that of the adolescent girl, a world full of excitement and discovery, especially under war conditions. The adults believe, perhaps, that young women cannot do anything of significance since they are stuck at home because of the war. Where can they possibly go, or to whom can they speak? Just as in *West Beirut*, *In the Battlefields* tries to reverse this image to show that war conditions can perhaps create wider spaces of freedom for girls like Lina and Siham to learn more about themselves, and open up to the world of men. These are the same conditions that help Tarek and Omar in Ziad Doueiri's film free themselves from the restrictions at home and discover the world of women, and the conditions that help their Christian female friend Mai learn about their adventure-filled world. Under the heavy weight of war, everything becomes possible because we do not know what tomorrow might bring. Perhaps, from an adolescent child's perspective, adventure (and gambling) is necessary to break the boredom and inactivity. Without her self-absorbed parents' knowledge, Lina and Siham are able to break down social restrictions to go out and meet Siham's men friends. Through these outings, Lina gets to know a world different from that of her parents: a chaotic world where young men and women meet freely, but also a world of militia men full of violence, danger and racist thoughts about Muslims in West Beirut. For Lina, however, it is a world in which everyone is free to do whatever they wish.

The third important point here is the ability of children to lie easily, to dissociate themselves from guilt and to spy on the adult world without being detected; and even if they are detected, no one really pays their

actions much attention. In the film, we observe Lina constantly spying, listening to and watching what takes place around her behind walls and closed doors. She also spies on Siham, and sees her kissing and embracing her lover in secret, while the family is in the shelter; but when Siham notices Lina spying on her she shoos her away like a kitten. In everyone's eyes, therefore, Lina is just a child on the margin whose feelings and wishes no one takes seriously, including Siham, who uses her closeness to Lina as an alliance against the family. However, we also discover in the film that Lina does not spy because she enjoys watching others, or merely to satisfy her curiosity, reasons that most adults believe are why children spy on them. She spies to forge a role for herself as a vital individual and a player in the unfolding events. Lina rebels against her marginalization by interfering in and influencing her family's world, as well as that of Siham, and thus changing the course of events.

Thus we reach the central point of the film that appears near the end, when Siham shares with Lina her plan to escape with her lover, and asks for her help in leaving the house. Lina keeps quite, ponders what Siham's escape really means and realizes that she actually means nothing at all to Siham, and she feels that the latter has in fact betrayed her and their friendship. She tells Siham: 'Auntie Yvonne bought you and you cannot leave.' She refuses to help Siham escape, and even reports her to Yvonne, who then locks Siham up in the house. The film here takes on another important dimension, which is Lina's class affiliation and the fact that she, after all, chooses to use her own family's class-based values against Siham. The film ends with an important scene which some critics believe was inspired by the final scene in Maroun Baghdadi's film *'huroob saghira* (Little Wars). Siham escapes from the house and runs through the empty streets, with Lina running behind her, desperately trying to catch up. Arbid comments on Lina's behaviour in this scene, saying that she wished to depict the harshness of adolescent years and what a girl Lina's age would feel when her only friend leaves her life for good. It is this first feeling of abandonment in a child's life that Arbid wished to portray. She adds:

It would have been easier for Lina had Siham died or been killed, than to lose her this way. We are capable of figuratively killing those we love in order to prevent them from leaving us. This was the idea here. This is an emotional story.<sup>13</sup>

In her analysis of the French film *Caché* by Director Michael Haneke, academic researcher Giuseppina Mecchia says that there is a child in each one of us, and that we should take a child's gaze and view of events into account because they could hold one of the main keys to the truth in our lives.<sup>14</sup> I think this is an important idea in the film *In the Battlefields* as well, since the camera follows Lina's gaze in order to discover what is hidden, and to peel off the falsehoods and lies.

Based on the above, therefore, I find that presenting events through a child's point of view or experience is a technique that carries with it many possibilities for empowering and promoting feminism in the Arab cinema. So far, the feminist cinematic experience is still limited in the Arab world, and does not yet constitute a strong current despite the progress the women's movement has made in the twentieth century. It seems to me as if the feminist cinema has not yet caught up as far as tackling taboo issues and breaching conservative ideologies are concerned. However, I also know that with this new generation of young cinematographers in the Arab world, in Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and Tunisia, for example, a feminist stream will emerge in cinema which might soon develop into a wide international current.

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* University of Manchester, UK.

1. Lina Khatib (2008), *Lebanese Cinema: Imagining the Civil War and Beyond* (London: I.B.Tauris). This study is an important reference in both historical and present-day Lebanese cinema, and in its analysis of the portrayal of the civil war.

2. Ali Jaafar (2009), 'Domestic battlefields: Danielle Arbid on *maarek hob*', interview with Danielle Arbid, *Bidoun Magazine*, available at [www.bidoun.org/magazine/02-we-are-old/domestic-battlefields-danielle-arbid-on-maarek-hob-by-ali-jaafar](http://www.bidoun.org/magazine/02-we-are-old/domestic-battlefields-danielle-arbid-on-maarek-hob-by-ali-jaafar), accessed 30 July 2013.

3. See these interviews on YouTube: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLMy9Az5eX8&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RLMy9Az5eX8&NR=1) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnhP4eCRKsU&NR=1](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gnhP4eCRKsU&NR=1).

4. Vicky Lebeau (2006), *Childhood and Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books), p. 69.

5. See, for example, Juliet Mitchell (1974), *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* (London: Allen Lane); Jacqueline Rose (1986), *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London and New York: Verso); and Laura Mulvey (1989), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan).

6. See Jacques Lacan (1979), *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, edited by Jacques-Alain Miller, translated by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin).

7. Ibid.; it is worth referring here to academic Slavoj Žižek's valuable study on Lacan's theory in his analysis of well-known artistic works, such as Hitchcock's films. See Slavoj Žižek (1992), *Looking Awry: An Introduction to Jacques Lacan through Popular Culture* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press).

8. See, for example, Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (New York, NY: Routledge); and Norman K. Denzin (1995) *The Cinematic Society: The Voyeur's Gaze* (London: Sage Publications).

9. In my opinion, this idea brings us the need to study and research the image of the women spying through the keyhole in Arab cinema, as well as this topic's importance in relation to one's identity, desires and relationship to the Other.

10. This article was first published in 1975; see Laura Mulvey (1975), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', *Screen*, 16(3) (Autumn); the article elicited a lot of criticism and sparked analyses by academic researchers and cinema critics. Mulvey reconsidered some of the theses presented in this article later on in her book, *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan, 1989).

11. See Laura Mulvey (1989), 'Visual pleasure and narrative cinema', in Laura Mulvey (ed.), *Visual and Other Pleasures* (London: Macmillan), p. 25.

12. See Khatib, *Lebanese Cinema*, p. 95.

13. See Jaafar, 'Domestic battlefields'.

14. Giuseppina Mecchia (2007), 'The children are still watching us, *Caché*/hidden in the folds of time', *Studies in French Cinema*, 7(2), pp. 131–41.



## PART THREE

# Islamic Feminism: Approaches and Visions

## CHAPTER 26

### Sisters in Islam

*Zainah Anwar\**

I should like to share with my Arab sisters a slice of feminist activism in my part of the world – of women activists, feminists, and unashamedly so, demanding justice and equality within Islam. Many of us Muslim feminists in South East Asia believe that God is just, and that Islam is just, as articles of our faith. We do not go on about that. We do not see why we should have to choose between being Muslim and being feminist. We do not want to discard our Muslim identity and our heritage in order to lead a life filled with possibilities as women.

But like Arab women, we have a serious problem with men – the patriarchs in our family, our society, our government, who use Islam to justify their privileged status in life. We are sick and tired of hearing men telling us what Islam is, what it is not, how we should dress, what we should drink, where we can go to socialize, what we can listen to, what we can say: the list of the forbidden in order to be a good Muslim woman as defined by men is endless.

We decided enough is enough. We will not allow men to define for us what Islam means to us. We will define it for ourselves, we will create a public voice for ourselves, and we will build a public constituency that will support our vision of a just and liberating Islam that will eventually make the patriarch's use of Islam to justify discrimination against women unacceptable and politically costly.

We made a decision not be silenced and intimidated anymore by bearded, turbaned, rabid, wild-eyed men who abuse God's words to force women into submission. So we studied the Qur'an for ourselves; we studied *fiqh* theories and principles; we asked difficult questions; and we challenged

those who claim to have monopoly and authority over matters of religion with a competing vision of Islam.

This of course makes us very unpopular among the Islamists and the religious authorities. They claim we have neither the right nor the authority to speak on Islam. They say we are confusing the *ummah* with our ideas. They say we use logic and *aql* (reason), instead of the written text. Every so often, they demand that the government shut us down, that a *fatwa* be issued against us for going against the teachings of Islam, that we be detained without trial under national security laws, or that we be sent to some faith rehabilitation centre. They have demonstrated against us after Friday prayers and have tried to charge us with insulting Islam.

Right now we are under attack, yet again, for our position challenging the sentence of six lashes of the whip against a young woman who was found guilty of drinking a glass of beer.

But we regard every attack against us as an opportunity to get our voice heard by a larger public. We are lucky that the media, in particular the English-language press and the online newspapers, are very supportive of our work. The phone calls and emails to our legal clinic increase, and so do the donations we get from the general public.

It is common for Muslim women who demand justice and equality, and want to change discriminatory laws and practices made in the name of Islam, to be told ‘This is God’s law’ and therefore not open to negotiation and change. To question, challenge or demand reform will supposedly go against *sharia*, weaken our faith in God and lead us astray from the straight path. We are often accused of being Westernized elites, anti-Islamic, anti-*sharia*, women who have deviated from our faith – our *aqidah* (doctrine), and our *iman* (faith), we are told, is weak. Reports are made against us to the police and to the religious authorities, who are asked to take action against us, to silence us, to charge us with insulting Islam, to ban our groups.

For us in Sisters in Islam (SIS), it is an article of faith that Islam is just and God is just. If justice is intrinsic to Islam, then how could injustice and discrimination result from the codification and implementation of laws and policies made in the name of Islam? And in today’s world, we assert, there cannot be justice without equality. It is as simple as that.

I know that members of the women’s movement come from different backgrounds. Some of us have worked for equality and justice within the

framework of religion and believe it is possible to find liberation within religion. Others have worked strictly within the human rights framework, and believe that to work with religion, where patriarchal interpretation prevails and *ijtihad* is forbidden, is a waste of time, or that religion is simply inherently unjust. As I was often told in the early days of Sisters in Islam, attending meetings of women's groups in the region: 'Why do you bother? For every one interpretation you can offer, the mullahs can offer 100 more. This is counter-productive, because you cannot beat them at their game.'

But Islam has not gone away from our lives. If anything, it has become even more powerful in shaping and influencing our lives and the society in which we live. By ignoring religion, by pretending that it has no role to play in public life, we leave the field open to the most conservative forces within Islam to define, dominate and set the parameters of what Islam is and what it is not. They define for us what Islam means, how to be a Muslim, how to be a good Muslim woman, wife and daughter, and then they prescribe for us laws and policies that keep us shackled as second-class Muslims and second-class citizens. And then, when we protest, they tell us to shut up because they say we have no authority to speak on Islam. They have all the answers.

Obviously they do not have all the answers since our lives are filled with oppression, injustice and discrimination. We assert that if Islam is used as a source of law and public policy, then all citizens must have a right to speak on the subject, Muslims and non-Muslims, experts and non-experts. Public law and public policy must by necessity be opened to public debate, and pass the test of public reason. If the Islamist activists and the mullahs do not want us to talk about Islam, then we tell them please to remove Islam from the public space and we will all shut up. But if they want to send us to prison, fine us, lash us, for violating what they deem to be the teachings of Islam, then we will be damned if we will just keep quiet.

Why is it nobody demands from us a degree in political science or economics or social studies before we can talk about the politics, the economic policies, the social ills of our country? When it comes to talking about Islamic laws and their impact on our daily lives, however, it is claimed that we need a degree in Islamic studies, that we must be able to speak Arabic before we can speak up (85 per cent of the Muslims in the world live in Asia, Africa and the West). Then even when we have the

qualifications, they say we must wear the *hijab* before we can claim to speak on Islam. And even when we wear the *hijab*, then they say our ideas are against Islam.

So the issue is really not about our qualifications to speak about Islam, is it? It is about the demands we make, positions we take that make life uncomfortable for those who have long been privileged.

Last February, SIS and an international planning committee launched Musawah, an initiative to build a global movement for equality and justice in the Muslim family. The global meeting brought together about 250 feminists and Islamic scholars to Kuala Lumpur to be part of a visible national, regional and international presence of a movement led by Muslim women, demanding equality and justice within Islam, and demanding that Islam should not be used to discriminate against women in law and public policy.

What Musawah hopes to bring to the larger women's and human rights movement is:

- an assertion that Islam can be a source of empowerment, not a source of oppression and discrimination;
- an effort to open new horizons for rethinking the relationship between human rights, equality and justice, and Islam;
- an offer to open a new constructive dialogue where religion is no longer an obstacle to equality for women, but a source for liberation;
- a collective strength of conviction and courage to stop governments and patriarchal authorities, as well as ideological non-state actors, from the convenience of using religion and the word of God to silence our demands for equality; and
- a space where activists, scholars and decision-makers, working within the human rights or the Islamic framework (or both), can interact and mutually strengthen our common pursuit of equality and justice for Muslim women.

As a start, the planning committee has produced three publications that we hope will help lay the foundation for Musawah as a knowledge-building movement. *Wanted: Equality and Justice in the Muslim Family* is a book of seven analytical papers that seek to understand the genesis of Muslim family law, how it was constructed within the classical *fiqh* tradition, and

how the wealth of resources within *fiqh*, as well as Qur'anic verses on justice, compassion and equality, can support reform towards a more egalitarian set of family relationships. The authors argue that equality and justice are both possible and necessary from within the Islamic tradition, within international human rights and constitutional frameworks, and given the lived realities of women and men in the Muslim world today.

We also spent a year developing the Musawah Framework for Action, which articulates our principles and values to guide the movement. And to ground our movement in the lived realities of Muslim women's lives we published *Home Truths*, which contains reports submitted by participants from 30 countries, who were asked the question: Why is equality necessary and why is equality possible in your own context? We are also building a resource-rich website to promote the principles of Musawah and the substantive arguments for family law reform using the holistic four-pronged approach we have adopted: how to justify equality and non-discrimination at the Islamic, constitutional, human rights and lived realities levels. For this approach, we owe a debt to the Maghreb 95 and their Guide to Equality, and in particular to our friends in L'Association Démocratique des Femmes du Maroc (Democratic Association of Moroccan Women), who have shared with us their strategies and experience at many meetings.

This is of course very much a work in progress. We do not claim we have found the answers to end discrimination against women, and particularly the use of Islam to discriminate against women. But the overwhelming response to Musawah has shown that nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come.

## Note

\* Sisters in Islam, Malaysia.

## CHAPTER 27

# Accounting for Affect: Kuwaiti Women Between Freedom and Apathy

*Mai al-Nakib\**

When it comes to enfranchisement, Kuwaiti women straddle a paradoxical terrain. On the one hand, they enjoy freedoms that other women in the Gulf do not. On the other, they remain disenfranchised when it comes to individual autonomy, divorce rights, sexual rights and so on. While small groups fight actively against these forms of discrimination, the majority of the population seems apathetic. This chapter unpacks this perplexing affect of apathy prevalent among Kuwaiti women regarding conditions that perpetuate their disadvantage. Ironically, the very freedom Kuwaiti women appear to enjoy may be one of the primary blocks, first, against a perception of their ongoing disenfranchisement and, second, against the impetus to change these adverse conditions.

In May 2009, during the run-up to the parliamentary election, an incident occurred involving candidate Aseel al-Awadhi, a philosophy professor at Kuwait University. A recording was posted on YouTube titled ‘The Aseel al-Awadhi Scandal’. It was a cut-and-paste job of a few of Dr al-Awadhi’s lectures to an all-women’s class on critical thinking. A medical student made the recording, though it is not clear who posted it on YouTube. In one of the segments, al-Awadhi is heard stating that the *hijab* is not meant for all women, that it was only intended for the prophet’s wives. She mentions the relevant Qur’anic *aya* (verse) and discusses the conditions of its revelation. Al-Awadhi remarks that we are not wives of the Prophet, and that the situation today is different from what it was in his day.

This YouTube post made the rounds. Dr al-Awadhi responded to the overblown situation in a talk also posted on YouTube (‘Dr Aseel al-Awadhi

Responds'). First, she explained the context of her statements: a class on critical thinking where students learn to address all sides of any argument and to argue their positions logically. She stated that she never gives her opinion on a subject, but presents different perspectives to allow students to come to their own conclusions. Al-Awadhi explained that while she teaches criticism, not *sharia*, the critical process tends to consolidate and enhance religious faith. She said that the point she made about the *hijab* is a well-known interpretation of the *aya*, and that the way the recording was put together made it seem as though she was against the *hijab*. She emphatically asserted that just because she does not wear the *hijab* herself does not mean her faith can be questioned. She added that her mother, family members and closest friends all wore the *hijab*. Dr al-Awadhi concluded that the reason she decided to respond to the attack was because doubt had been cast on her religious faith, and she would not tolerate this.

That Aseel al-Awadhi went on to win a parliamentary position was, in some ways, an irrefutable victory for women. Along with the three other women elected to the National Assembly of Kuwait for the first time, al-Awadhi's historic achievement can be read as a marker of Kuwait's increasingly progressive stance toward women's rights.<sup>1</sup>

The political right to vote and to stand for parliamentary election – for which Kuwaiti women had fought for four decades – was won in 2005. Since then, women have voted and run for parliament in three elections.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, Kuwaiti women have been appointed ministers, members of the Municipal Council, ambassadors and president of Kuwait University, among numerous other positions.<sup>3</sup> Kuwaiti women make up 44 per cent of the workforce and 70 per cent of the students at Kuwait University. They are academics, teachers, scientists, doctors, nurses, lawyers, journalists, CEOs, entrepreneurs, bankers and so on. They have the right to drive, to travel and to wear whatever they choose.<sup>4</sup> The outcome of the May 2009 parliamentary election – four women elected, fewer tribal and Islamist candidates, more liberal candidates – seems to suggest that the active struggle for women's freedoms is both paying off and on the rise.<sup>5</sup> al-Awadhi's success in particular, despite the strategically timed and religiously inflected attack against her, can be read as a hopeful sign of change in what has become, since the late 1980s, a highly orthodox and conservative social milieu.<sup>6</sup>



Nonetheless, I would argue that al-Awadhi's response to the scandal and her subsequent success expose another, less obvious problem. On the one hand, her articulate explanation of critical thinking and her laudable championing of tolerance toward minority perspectives express a progressive position. Her election by the second largest majority of voters in her district suggests that a chunk of the population supported her liberal views.<sup>7</sup> However, al-Awadhi's response to the attack did not simply rely on a lucid definition of critical thought. A major component of her defence involved using religion to validate her innocence.

The question I would like to pose here is: What does al-Awadhi's recourse to religious discourse reveal about the affective constitution of Kuwaiti women when it comes to their freedom?

A number of key concepts in the philosophy of seventeenth-century philosopher Benedict de Spinoza may be helpful here.<sup>8</sup> Spinoza conceptualizes a body in terms of its capacity to affect and to be affected by other bodies.<sup>9</sup> Relations or encounters between bodies result in particular 'affections' or mixtures.<sup>10</sup> Affections are what happen to a body directly as a result of any given encounter. Some affections envelop 'sad affects', others envelop 'joyful affects', depending on whether they decrease or increase a body's power to act – that is, its affective capacity.<sup>11</sup> By 'affect', Spinoza means the transition or lived passage from one affective state to another.<sup>12</sup> An affect is not itself a state, nor is it exactly an affection. An affect is, instead, the non-subjective, non-representational, irreducible transition between affections. It is the autonomous space where the potential for change is inherent.<sup>13</sup>

Every encounter between bodies presents an opportunity for transformation. As French philosopher Gilles Deleuze explains in his study on Spinoza: '[Y]ou do not know beforehand what a body or a mind can do, in a given encounter, a given arrangement, a given combination'.<sup>14</sup> This plastic sense of the body is not widely perceived. In fact, most societies are organized around a limited selection of tolerated affects. When such affective orientations become dominant, they construct what Deleuze calls an 'image of thought'.<sup>15</sup> As opposed to thought itself, an image of thought is the kind of thought usually recognized as common or good sense and is often accepted as 'true'.<sup>16</sup> Images of thought inevitably limit the proliferation of affects other than those deemed acceptable and, thus,

constrict a body's power to act outside the parameters set by dominant institutional bodies such as the state, the mosque, the economy or the family. In Spinoza's vocabulary, an image of thought would be understood as an 'inadequate idea'. According to Spinoza, inadequate ideas are the insufficient ideas most of us have based on our affective experiences.<sup>17</sup> Such ideas are inadequate because most of us do not fully comprehend the compositional relations of our affections and are content to imagine falsely that these might be based on unreliable signs.<sup>18</sup> So, instead of tracing the myriad determinations that force us to feel, think and act the way we do, we resort to standard images of thought to explain our sensibility and our actions to ourselves and others.

This reactive tendency restricts acts to 'passions'. Spinoza defines passions as affects of which we are only a partial cause and about which we have only an inadequate idea.<sup>19</sup> Despite their inadequate causation, some passions – 'joyful' passions – can still increase our power to act, even as other passions – called 'sad' passions – decrease it.<sup>20</sup> The affect of joy is a transition from a lesser degree of power to a greater degree of power, whereas the affect of sorrow is a transition from a greater degree of power to a lesser one – where power signifies the power to think and to act.<sup>21</sup>

On the other hand, the much rarer 'actions' are affects grounded in 'adequate ideas'.<sup>22</sup> Adequate ideas are those that arise from a conceptual comprehension of life (including ourselves) as immanent or self-caused.<sup>23</sup> An adequate sense of life expresses a full awareness of its ongoing and infinitely variable affective capacities and ontological powers. When the causation or determinations of a body's affections are adequately understood, a body begins to recognize that, in fact, it is ultimately the cause of its own affections.<sup>24</sup> The affect enveloped within this rare realization is, according to Spinoza, active rather than passive. It induces creative thought instead of relying on a string of habituated images of thought.

From Spinoza's perspective, the move from passive to active affects, which corresponds with the move from inadequate to adequate ideas, is a step toward freedom. Freedom for Spinoza is a matter of adequately understanding our own specific historical determinations of affects and existence, and then maximizing the sorts of encounters that increase our capacity to act and to live.<sup>25</sup> Such ways of acting and being cannot be

predicted in advance, but generally the impetus will be to act in ways that are 'good' rather than 'bad' for us. For Spinoza, good and bad are not moralistic judgements. They have to do with whether or not an encounter increases or decreases a body's power or affective capacity.<sup>26</sup> Because Spinoza's project is an 'ethics' or 'ethology', freedom entails action that increases the power of all bodies at all times and not simply those of a select few at a particular time.<sup>27</sup>

We can now consider how some of these Spinozist insights might be relevant to a feminist politics in the Middle East by returning to the al-Awadhi YouTube scandal. In the encounter between, on the one hand, the student who decides to tape al-Awadhi's lectures and, on the other, the critical and secular ideas al-Awadhi presents in class, the student is badly affected and her capacity to act in ways that increase joyful passions or actions is diminished. Her knee-jerk response, constricted by religious or, perhaps, familial or tribal images of thought, prevents her from encountering the lecture contents as anything other than scandalous, sinful or evil. Or, rather more cynically, her reactive response may have been prompted by an economic image of thought registering a golden opportunity to make some money by selling the tapes to anyone interested in damaging al-Awadhi's political chances. Both the young student and whoever posted the recording on YouTube were banking on the sad passions of a society ordered by religious images of thought; that is to say, they were banking on their society's uncritical and reactive affections.

They were, at least in part, wrong, as al-Awadhi's success attested. A large majority of voters apparently utilized adequate ideas to reject images of thought that might have restricted their affective responses. They transformed a potentially bad encounter into a good one – one that has now increased the body politic's affective capacities and ontological powers by joining it with a kind of body historically excluded (namely, female). This transition is no doubt an expression of joyful affects. However, joyful affects in Spinoza remain passions, and it is uncertain to what extent al-Awadhi was voted into office as a result of truly adequate thinking and free action.

In fact, al-Awadhi's response references the same dogmatic images of thought the student and her co-conspirators took for granted. While al-Awadhi begins her defence with a strong account of critical thinking that appears aligned with Spinoza's notion of adequate ideas and free action, in

fact, as it turns out, such critical thought is of value primarily to consolidate religious faith. Al-Awadhi's recourse to her religious credentials ends up reinforcing the same orthodox images of thought that have kept women out of politics and discriminated against. If it was, in fact, this turn to religion that won her the vote, then al-Awadhi's success is less a sign of freedom for women than it is a marker of their sad passions.

Apathy is one such sad passion. While there has always been a strong group of women actively fighting for their rights in Kuwait, they form only a small minority of the population, mostly members of government-sponsored women's organizations.<sup>28</sup> Such organizations have, for the most part, focused on the issue of political rights, failing to tackle other, less obvious, but far more insidious forms of discrimination against women, including physical and sexual abuse, lack of physical and sexual autonomy, lack of intellectual and religious freedom, among many others. Sociologist Haya al-Mughni has attributed this 'depressing state of inertia' to Kuwaiti women's embeddedness in the patriarchal system of *ashira* – familial and tribal groups – upon which the state itself is built.<sup>29</sup> She adds that religious revivalism has not done much to change the general apathy toward women's issues.<sup>30</sup> Complacency can also be attributed to the Kuwaiti population's relative wealth, which seems to blunt critical awareness of female oppression and the impetus for social and political change.<sup>31</sup>

For al-Mughni, with whom I agree, class, family and religious divisions prevent the kind of feminist solidarity needed to transform the social body wholesale.<sup>32</sup> What is necessary, I would suggest, is an affective, not just political, social or economic, transformation of apathy to uncircumscribed action. The kind of freedom expressed by enfranchisement and the election of women to parliament remains, paradoxically, a limiting image of freedom. Such an image may reinforce rather than subvert Kuwaiti women's apathetic affective orientations by falsely signalling the end of women's disenfranchisement. This would be a bad interpretation, one based on an inadequate understanding of how the material conditions of women's oppression have not actually changed at all and will not until women begin actively to recognize and engage its fundamental causes, such as class, kinship and orthodox religious practice. The transition between al-Awadhi's defence of critical thinking and her defence of her religious belief provided an opportunity to shift affective orientation – that is, to create a new way of

thinking and feeling about the *hijab*, women's bodies and much else besides – which was quickly re-routed back to the familiar, orthodox images of thought organizing life in Kuwait. Rather than opening up a discussion about how critical thought is good for any society, al-Awadhi's defence resorted to proving that critical thought did not break any moral codes and was aligned with faith.

Morality relies on restricting thought, action and being, within codes of judgement gilded with the sheen of irrefutable 'truth', codes generally unfavourable to women. As Arab feminists, it behooves us to shift our affective orientation toward an ethics or ethology rather than a codified morality that restricts which kinds of freedoms are acceptable and which ones are not. Ethics does not judge bodies or actions based on fixed laws or assumed truths, but, rather, assesses encounters, events, people or ideas based on the extent to which they increase or decrease our capacity to live and to act productively. Ethics relies on thought, knowledge and ongoing analysis; it presumes life to be open to constant modification. Unlike morality, it is not based on commandments, nor does it demand blind obedience. Instead, it opens the door to experiments in living.<sup>33</sup> All this may seem terribly impractical when it comes to feminist political action. From a certain perspective, it is. On such a view, al-Awadhi's religious response was the more practical one; it got her into office and that will help make Kuwait a less oppressive place for women. However, in the long run, an ethological feminism may prove to be the more practical option – where practicality is not automatically equated with instrumental practice but, rather, with the kinds of affective changes that can transform how we feel about our lives. To ignore the possibilities of a feminist ethics is to remain enslaved by images of thought that separate us from our infinite power to multiply joyful affects, to be less reactive and, therefore, more open to what life in this part of the world might become.

## Notes

\* Kuwait University, Kuwait.

1. The three other women candidates elected to parliament were Dr Rola Dashti, an economist, Dr Masouma al-Mubarak, a political scientist, and Dr Salwa al-Jassar, a professor of education.

2. Parliamentary elections in Kuwait are meant to take place once every four years. However, since 2006, the parliament has been constitutionally dissolved three times by the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, for various reasons, mostly to do with conflicts between the parliament (i.e. the National Assembly) and the government (i.e. the Prime Minister and the Cabinet of

Ministers). A constitutional dissolution of parliament requires that elections for the new Assembly are held within two months from the date of dissolution. Because of these three constitutional but nonetheless atypical dissolutions of parliament, women have been able to vote and run for parliament three times rather than just once. This unusual situation may have provided women candidates with the necessary experience to win seats more quickly than would likely have occurred otherwise.

3. Newly elected MP Masouma al-Mubarak was the first woman ever appointed minister to the Cabinet (as minister of planning, minister of transport and, later, minister of health). Nouria al-Sbeih was the second woman appointed to the Cabinet (as minister of education). Currently, there is only one woman member of the Cabinet: Mudhi al-Humud (formerly minister of housing and development and currently minister of education).

4. On 20 October 2009, Kuwait's Constitutional Court (the country's highest tribunal panel) ruled that Kuwaiti women have the right to obtain a passport without the consent of their parents, husbands or guardians; Rawan Khalid (2009), 'Women laud Kuwait court ruling on passports', *Kuwait Times*, 21 October. In addition, on 28 October 2009, the Constitutional Court ruled that women lawmakers are not required to wear the *hijab*; Diana Elias (2009), 'Kuwait: headscarf not a must for female lawmakers', *The Huffington Post*, 28 October, available at <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/huffwires/20091028/ml-kuwait-women-s-rights/>, accessed 12 September 2013.

5. For an analysis of the election results, see B. Izzak (2009), 'Women break assembly barrier', *Kuwait Times*, 18 May; Valiya S. Sajjad and Dahlia Kholaf (2009), 'Baghli sees change', *Arab Times*, 17 May; and Mary Ann Tétreault and Mohammed al-Ghanim (2009), 'The day after "victory": Kuwait's 2009 election and the contentious present', *Middle East Report Online*, Middle East Research and Information Project, 8 July.

6. For a cogent account of the rise of Islamic revivalism in Kuwait and its effect on women's issues and women's organizations, see Haya al-Mughni (1993), *Women in Kuwait: The Politics of Gender* (London: Saqi), pp. 113–38.

7. Al-Mubarak came in first (of ten) in her district; Dashti came in seventh (of ten); and al-Jassar came in tenth (of ten).

8. Spinoza's ideas have been put to inventive use by Western somatic feminists including Moira Gatens, Genevieve Lloyd and Elizabeth Grosz, to name three of the most prominent. My Deleuzo–Spinozist argument is especially indebted to Gatens' theoretical interventions; see Moira Gatens (1996), *Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality* (London: Routledge); and Moira Gatens (1996), 'Through a Spinozist lens: ethology, difference, power', in Paul Patton (ed.), *Deleuze: A Critical Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell), pp. 162–87. For numerous reasons, many of which go beyond the scope of this chapter, I strongly believe Arab feminist theory stands to gain from a careful and contextualized engagement with some of the innovative work being done by Spinozist and Deleuzian feminists around the world (for a sampling, see Claire Colebrook and Jami Weinstein (eds) (2008), *Deleuze and Gender* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press); see also Ian Buchanan and Claire Colebrook (eds) (2000), *Deleuze and Feminist Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

9. Benedict de Spinoza (1994), *A Spinoza Reader: The Ethics and Other Works*, edited and translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press); Gilles Deleuze (1988), *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, translated by Robert Hurley (San Francisco, CA: City Lights).

10. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, p. 154.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 160–3.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 154.

13. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994), *What Is Philosophy?*, translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York, NY: Columbia University Press).

14. Deleuze, *Spinoza*, p. 125; Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, p. 155.

15. Gilles Deleuze (1994), *Difference and Repetition*, translated by Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 131.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Ibid., pp. 134–6.
18. Gilles Deleuze (1990), *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, translated by Martin Joughin (New York, NY: Zone).
19. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, p. 154.
20. Ibid., p. 188.
21. Ibid., p. 161.
22. Ibid., pp. 116–247.
23. Ibid., p. 100; Gatens, ‘Through a Spinozist lens’, p. 164–7.
24. Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy*, p. 151.
25. Spinoza, *A Spinoza Reader*, p. 212.
26. Ibid., p. 204.
27. Deleuze, *Spinoza*, pp. 27, 125. According to Deleuze, Spinoza’s ethology does not define animals and humans in terms of ‘the abstract notions of genus and species’, but, rather, ‘by a capacity for being affected’ (Ibid., p. 27). Unlike conventional ‘morality’, ethics as ethology does not judge behaviour as right/wrong or good/evil, nor does it judge people (or life itself) on the basis of what they *should* be. Instead, ethology assesses our capacities to exist and considers what we might be capable of doing to increase our powers of living (by increasing joyful passions and actions through good encounters). Whereas morality judges life from the fixed perspective of transcendent laws, ethics views life as an ongoing experiment whose outcome cannot be predicted in advance.
28. al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, pp. 63–138.
29. Ibid., p. 142.
30. Ibid., pp. 120, 142.
31. Ibid., p. 142; Brian Katulis (2005), ‘Women’s rights in focus: Kuwait’, *Freedom House*, Freedom House, Inc., 8 March. Web, 30 August.
32. al-Mughni, *Women in Kuwait*, p. 144.
33. Gatens, ‘Through a Spinozist lens’, p. 178.

## Further reading

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- Dr. Aseel al-Awadhi Responds to the Fabricated Recording – Part One* (D. Aseel al-Awadhi tarid ‘ala altasjyl almufabrak – al-juz’ al-awal). YouTube, 7 May 2009. Available at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kA8kmhG2Sx&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4kA8kmhG2Sx&feature=related), accessed 1 August 2009.
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## CHAPTER 28

# Islamic Feminism in Egypt: Between Acceptance and Rejection\*

*Hoda El-Saadi\*\**

### Introduction

‘Islamic feminism’ is a modern term that was coined in South Africa in the early 1990s, and played a vital role in spreading women’s demands among South Africa’s Muslim men and women, at a time when the term was just beginning to be heard in different parts of the Muslim world, such as Turkey and Iran. The Iranian feminist magazine *Zinan*, which first appeared in 1992, played a major role in the general development that would include the notion of Islamic feminism through its support for women’s rights. The magazine published articles in which both men and women attempted to reinterpret the Qur’an and other religious texts, and uphold a liberal point of view that challenged the male-oriented interpretation of Islam. It also expressed the Iranian feminists’ disappointment in the Iranian Revolution; many of these feminists were exiled in the early 1990s. In that same decade, the term began to spread especially among Muslim women émigrés in the West, in the wake of the cultural conflict between Islam and the West. Several other initiatives were launched in different areas in an attempt to counter the restrictions and inequalities generated by the masculine interpretation of Islam. Shortly after that, the term ‘feminist Islam’ was used to describe the debate around women’s issues, including issues of equality and justice between the sexes.<sup>1</sup>

In the rapid spread of the term among Muslim émigré women in the West, most of whom were originally from Asia and South Africa, it was



accepted as a spontaneous and natural product of the process of self-definition, in the research on women's rights from an Islamic perspective.

The term's appearance in the Arab world, however, raised many questions and objections and, at the same time, became a topic of discussion and debate among Arab Muslim researchers interested in women's issues.

The past 15 years have witnessed an Islamist women's revival in the Arab world, coupled with a persistent effort on the part of Arab Muslim women researchers, who identify with the Islamist perspective, to improve the condition of women, and produce search material and studies on gender and related issues. The women worked together to analyse various discourses and methodologies, and discuss them from within Muslim culture itself. They reread these texts carefully in order to incorporate them into a culturally authentic, Islam-based reformulation of the gender perspective and thus achieve their abrogated rights. However, although the women were in agreement on the objective, they disagreed over the definition and name of this new field. While some Muslim women researchers in the Arab world identify openly with Islamic feminism and have no problem with the name, others reject it.

The question that begs itself here is: why did Islamic feminism in the Arab countries not develop and mature the way feminism did in the West? What were the reasons for the debates and disagreements in the Arab world around the term Islamic feminism?

Islamic feminists in the West answer by saying that they live in a secure environment where their freedom of self-expression and thought are not under threat. Asma Barlas, exiled from her country in 1984, says that Islamic feminism can only move forward in a democracy, and that the control of fundamentalism over religious life in general, coupled with the traditions of silence, coercion and piety, prevalent in most Arab countries, have obstructed the development of Islamic feminism. Any proposition that is either new or different to what already exists might lead to apostasy.<sup>2</sup>

## **The debate in Egypt between acceptance and rejection**

I chose Egypt as the subject of my research because it was not possible to include the entire Arab world. The advantage of choosing Egypt is the fact

that this country represents the longest and most deeply rooted Arab experience with the problems and issues of Arab women in modern times.

There is an almost total rejection of Islamic feminism in Egypt, and Egyptian women researchers avoid using the term as much as possible. If we survey the Egyptian scene today we will find only one woman researcher, Professor of English Literature at Cairo University, Dr Omaila Abou-Bakr, who accepts the term 'Islamic feminism' and finds no contradiction in simultaneously adopting both a feminist point of view and the Islamic value system. Dr Abou-Bakr has produced a large body of research through which she expresses her belief in Islamic feminism, and her total conviction in the absence of any contradiction between the principles on which women's studies are based, or the feminist studies that aim to uncover the tools of coercion and marginalization and call for liberation, on the one hand, and commitment to the authority of Islam, on the other. I should mention, in this context, the appearance in the late 1990s of the Women and Culture Group, which openly professed its adherence to Islamic authority in matters related to women and their rights, though they were active for only a few years before disappearing from the Egyptian scene.

The rejection of Islamic feminism in Egypt comes from two opposing camps. First, a number of researchers, such as Professor Safinaz Kathem and Dr Heba Raouf Ezzat, adopted a recipe for improving the condition of women that rests on a feminist point of view and the system of Islamic values, though they strongly reject the term Islamic feminism and avoid using it. They refuse to overlook the Western origins of the term, and believe it to be the brainchild of Western non-Muslim researchers aimed at categorizing Muslim women, and imposing it on them. They also strongly object to it because they believe that 'Islamic' is a marginal or secondary descriptive term to the original term, 'feminism'. In their opinion, Islam and its value systems do not need to be attached to any foreign theories or ideologies: Islam is the original reference criterion, and any addition to it would be counter-productive and insulting to Islam. In their view, the term divides the nation, especially with its separatist tendencies.<sup>3</sup>

Although Safinaz Kathem recognizes the subjugation of women, she blames this on ignorance of the religion. She believes that this oppression has less to do with gender than with despotism in general, and that the problem does not lie in the coercion of women by men, but rather in the

oppression of their fellow human beings by those who do not fear God. She calls herself one of the feminist movement's staunchest enemies, and underlines the Islamic concepts of justice and absence of despotism. She believes that feminism as a movement harms and warps women because it causes a division between masculinity and femininity.<sup>4</sup>

For her part, Heba Raouf Ezzat refuses to be called a feminist because 'feminism is incompatible with religion', and because it is divisive, individualistic and part of the overall impact of the West, which makes it incompatible with Islamic cultures. She emphasizes her Islamic identity, which allows her to express her anger and discontent at Western contempt for it. In spite of this, she does not reject feminism outright and admits that women in Muslim societies have failed to achieve their rights, which explains the success of Western feminist movements in Egypt.

Second, a number of secular women researchers and activists reject Islamic feminism as well, as secular feminist ideology frames its discourse outside any religion. These feminists reject theories that try to reconcile the religious and secular discourses, and favour instead the internationally recognized discourse of human rights. They identify with feminism and do not see it as a Western product; rather, they are proud to be part of its overall struggle, and categorically reject any link between the feminist identity and Islam. Nawal El Saadawi is a good example of this feminist vision; she blames all the Abrahamic religions for being rooted in patriarchy and, given their basic setups, sees no room for any talk about feminist awareness, or even improving women's status, within the context of anyone of them.<sup>5</sup> For its part, the New Woman Research Centre has adopted a distinctive political feminist stance and highlights first and foremost feminist identity, followed by Egyptian and Arab identities. The Centre insists that its reference point is humanism, and that it draws on a variety of human cultural resources to further women's interests, chief among which is the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Centre sees itself as a secular democratic institution that rejects all policies of dependency, and aims at building a society based on social justice, equality and prosperity; it seeks to give the feminist struggle a global character. The Centre's researchers reject Islamic feminism, which they believe is destructive to the genuine feminist patrimony whose backbone is based in progressive movements. They see

Islamic feminism, which is rooted in religious faith, as incompatible with the laws of progressive development.

## **Features and characteristics of Islamic feminism in Egypt**

In Egypt, Muslim women's discourse centres around the Qur'an as well as genuine Muslim practices based on the example of the Prophet, the *sunna*. The Islamic feminists read and interpret *ayas* (verses) of the Qur'an that concern women and gender relations, and use research and independent interpretation to come up with new meanings for them more in tune with justice, mercy (*tarahom*) and what is right in Islam. Islamic feminists thus formulate their own responses to the interpretations that focus on specific *ayas* and terms that highlight the notions of preference, control and discrimination based on ability and bias towards one gender, and try to offer alternative interpretative methods and points of view to counter those used to advocate the discrimination against women. Chief among these methods is paying particular attention to the textual context – that is, linking the *ayas* to the paragraphs in which they appear, or linking *ayas* in different *surahs* to one another and examining the extent to which their meanings remain constant, or change from one *aya* to the other. They also identify different interpretations and examine whether they agree with or contradict one another, in order to distinguish between a genuine interpretation and an interpreter's personal opinion inspired by a particular social culture. In their efforts to produce new concepts and interpretations, these researchers take care not to deviate either from the Qur'an's uppermost values or the basic tenets of Islam.<sup>6</sup>

Dr Omaina Abou-Bakr has contributed a great deal to this field through her study entitled 'A Review of Koranic Interpretations from a Gender Perspective', which is an analytical study of various interpretations of the 'qawwamah' *aya* (*surah* 4, *aya* 34) dating back to the tenth century – from al-Tabari to Metwali Shaarawi. Dr Abou-Bakr believes that the aim of reinterpretation is not to criticize, attack, destroy or focus on the negative, but rather to come up with enlightened interpretations that rectify and reform. The objective of reinterpretation is to offer solutions and new opinions, and produce an alternative body of knowledge free of the absolute power that one individual or gender can wield over the other. These new concepts and alternative knowledge produced by Islamic feminists are

essential to finding solutions based on jurisprudence, issuing creative rulings that re-establish the social balance and solve real day-to-day problems. This new material also helps women active in the domain of jurisprudence address current rulings on marriage, divorce, the legal control of men over women (*qawwamah*) and multiple marriages.<sup>7</sup>

Over and above the reinterpretation of Qur'anic texts, Omaima Abou-Bakr used a different methodology to produce a liberated, Islamic feminist body of knowledge, which is to re-examine historical texts and reinterpret them from a feminist point of view. She believes that, over and above the theoretical study of the Qur'an and the *sunna*, adding a historical dimension to the study of women in Islam will draw attention to the social and cultural make-up of the respective roles of women and men in different historical periods. Rereading Islamic history is not just an academic pursuit of knowledge; it is also, and above all, a political objective since it expresses an attitude towards life, and reflects a willingness to participate positively in the cultural and social life to bring about change in favour of a fairer and more balanced social and cultural life for all members of society.

Omaima Abou-Bakr's method of studying and understanding history is different from the traditional one. She relies not only on material facts and historical figures, but also on social and cultural discourses in order to reinterpret and thus emerge with new meanings and significances. She believes that new interpretations of history play a role in organizing and reorganizing the historical experience, and therefore interprets past history from the perspective of the present, and for its sake. She rereads the vast traditional sources and archival documents, but asks new questions and uses new methodologies. She has produced an impressive number of historical studies that have succeeded in countering the exclusion and marginalization that Muslim women have had to contend with, both in their academic studies and daily lives. She has reviewed preconceived rulings against women in popular historical texts, and has come up with alternative accounts of women's role in history. Her objective has been to deconstruct the past and come up with a new vision of it. In all her studies, Abou-Bakr adopts modern attitudes, and challenges hegemonic opinion that speaks of women's isolation and limited participation outside the home. Before the advent of modernity, Muslim women were important and active members of their societies and in their daily lives; they owned property and enjoyed a measure of economic power. Abou-Bakr's research path is liberating on two

levels: first, it liberates us from the shackles of colonial scholarship and domination; and, second, it finds in history alternative visions that prove inspiring. She challenges the prevalent negative stereotypes and reconstructs the presence of women in the public sphere to shed light on their role as active individuals, and give them the centrality they deserve. Focusing on women as historically active elements in society helps change the stereotype from 'women in Islam' (as a subject for study) to 'Muslim women'.<sup>8</sup>

In her study project entitled *awraq althakira* (Memory Papers), Abou-Bakr closely examines women's lives and professions in the pre-modern era in search of pioneers among the religiously devout, the ascetic, the modernizers and the physicians in the early Islamic period. Her aim was to shed light on women's activities and the significant roles they played in religious life and various avenues of religious activism, including jurisprudence, delivering legal opinion, preaching and teaching. Once again, she highlights through her project women's historic activism in the economic sphere to refute the masculine view regarding the economic dependence of women, and to counter the stereotypical image, imposed by the masculine institution, which says that the home is the kingdom of women, while the marketplace, the source of all wealth, is the exclusive domain of men.

Many of these feminist-conscious historical studies, present in vast numbers in the West, are the work of Egyptian women researchers living in the United States and Europe, such as Amira Sunbul, Afaf Lutfi al-Sayed and others. In Egypt, on the other hand, such work is limited to Omaima Abou-Bakr; other Egyptian women historians fall under the classic masculine system that relies on traditional accounts and analytical methods.<sup>9</sup>

The third track Abou-Bakr follows in her Islamic feminist studies is Muslim discourse directed at Muslim men. Muslim women have been subjected to guiding and sermonizing discourses that focus disproportionately on the responsibilities of women in Islam, in the family, the home and towards their children, without a parallel focus on defining the religious, moral and family obligations that men owe women in Muslim societies. Abou-Bakr follows this track in her study entitled '*sourat alrajul fi alkitab alislamiyya: bayn altafaseer alqadimah walhadithah*' (The Image of Men in Islamic Texts: Between Old and New Interpretations), in

which she examines the position of men in the Islamic– Qur’anic context, and wonders why women are the exclusive target of sermonizing and guidance by contemporary discourses on Islam. She also wonders why women bear the heavier burden of family and social reform, and are singled out for accountability and oversight. In her view, focusing on the role of men as well, and making the man an equal target of such guidance, rectification and reform discourses would be closer to the spirit of the Qur’an. Abou-Bakr also wonders: Are men currently performing their rightful Islamic duties towards the family as fathers, husbands, sons and brothers? What is the Islamic concept of masculinity, and what values and role does it have in the Islamic system? How did the old interpreters and jurists understand the role of men and its nature, in comparison to modern times? How did they draft the discourse that guides and advises men on how to deal with women in light of the many warnings in the Qur’an against oppression, harm and refraining from *al ‘ishra bil-maarouf* (to live with women on a footing of kindness and equity)? There is a marked difference between these questions that at least hold men religiously and morally accountable, just like women, and modern discourses that place the heavier burden of raising the standards of culture, religion, morality, the family and society on the shoulders of women.

For all these reasons, Abou-Bakr sees the need for Muslim women researchers to turn the tables and assume the role of constructive monitor and overseer based on the *aya* that speaks about believers, both men and women, as protectors one of another, enjoining what is just and forbidding what is evil (*surat altauba, aya 71*).<sup>10</sup>

## **Feminist research methodologies: the Women and Culture Group**

The Women and Culture Group, a collection of researchers focusing on conditions in Egypt, appeared at the turn of the second millennium. Its members are academic female researchers who adhere to the Islamic feminist project, and whose research reflects the dire need for a solid feminist body of knowledge that draws on Muslim religious tenets. Their work is meant to confirm identity without disengaging from it, and establish a list of priorities and feminist programmes based on the needs of Muslim societies, rather than on current global agendas.

The Group's research appeared in three specialized newsletters, entitled 'Women and Culture', and dated 2000, 2001 and 2002, after which they stopped appearing altogether. In the first newsletter, the Group focused on a critique of Western feminist knowledge, the most important piece among which was a study by Dr Amani Saleh, in which she highlights the particular characteristics of Islamic feminism that consider the revelations to be a genuine source of knowledge, in addition to other material and historical sources. In her study, Saleh gave two reasons why there is a need for an Islamic feminist body of knowledge. The first has to do with Western feminist knowledge that causes rejection and alienation in non-Western feminists, since it contradicts their ontological beliefs, and tends to destroy existing social and epistemological structures, rather than trying to amend them. The second has to do with the particular circumstances and problems of Muslim women, and the efforts of feminist knowledge to alleviate injustice against women, which, to be successful, needs – in her opinion – the particular attributes of Islamic feminist knowledge. Injustice in Muslim societies springs from official and public cultural structures, from the science associated with religion and its interpretations, and from social organizations claiming to represent religion. She thus arrives at the conclusion that

efforts to support women can only succeed in the presence of a knowledge base that clearly and unequivocally aims at dissociating human history from the sacred texts, and purifying original Muslim texts and sources, like the Qur'an and *sunna*, from all man-made additions and interpretations, and from intellectual formulas inspired by human customs, opinions and biases.<sup>11</sup>

The methodologies used by the Women and Culture Group to produce feminist knowledge were as follows.

### *Research in the history of Muslim women*

Research in the history of Muslim women was at the core of the Women and Culture Group's interests, and the Group's researchers paid particular attention to the position and role of women in Islamic history. As they saw it:

researching the position of women in Islamic history is not meant to improve the picture of women, nor is it a frivolous intellectual exercise; it lies at the core of the reform project that



means to activate the comprehensive value of justice for women, and ensure that justice is done. In an environment based on deeply-rooted concepts and inherited notions hiding behind the mantle of religion, though religion has nothing to do with them, understanding and deconstructing these concepts and laying bare their historical formation blocks is the first step towards renewal, reform and fairness.<sup>12</sup>

Given the importance of this subject, the researchers devoted their second newsletter to research on the history of Muslim women, and reviewed the roles they played in it. They studied the impact that the recognition by women of the Prophet Mohammed had on their political role, and looked at the political activities of the *kharijat* (women who turned away from Islam) in the last part of the caliphate of Ali. They addressed academic and cultural contributions of women, and presented a study on the different strata of women jurists, and other important issues, such as the function of female jurists and the role they played in politics, as well as the relationship between women and legal opinion. They ventured into the spiritual domain by studying the lives of *soufi*women in Islamic history, and addressed a very important aspect, namely the personal lives of these *soufi*women and how they performed their wifely and motherly duties despite their *soufi*lifestyle. They went beyond official literary archives in search of additional material on women, and looked at how they are depicted in legends and folktales, which they regarded as sources complementary to the more recognized ones, in the belief that by integrating both sets of sources, they would arrive at a more complete picture. They also studied the way men are depicted in Arab women's poetry, and shed light on the lives of individual Muslim women by focusing on the example of Sayyida Zeinab bint al-Zahra'.<sup>13</sup>

## *2. Re-examination of the Qur'anic discourse on women*

The Group's researchers looked at foundational and theoretical sources in search of new readings of the Qur'an's discourse on women, and strongly criticized historical interpretations that fall outside its context.

These women researchers believed that there was a dire need to establish new methodological bases that draw on the foundation, to help re-examine the domain of women studies and review traditions. They also believed that, in the study of Islamic theoretical sources, one should distinguish between the authentic (the Qur'an and the *sunna*) and secondary sources (folklore

and Islamic thought), and that there is a difference between the original text and its interpretation. In their opinion, no matter how careful an interpretation is in its effort to understand a text, there will always be a difference between it and the original due to their different origins, which makes it important not to bestow holiness on human efforts to interpret the Holy Qur'an.<sup>14</sup> Among the more important papers on the subject of women in the Qur'an is a study by Dr Amani Saleh in which she uses an understanding of 'gender' in the Qur'an to examine the issue of women. Her research led her to a new Islamic concept which she thought was more appropriate and comprehensive in its definition of gender relations, the concept of *alzawajiya*, or 'conjuality'.

The series of research studies produced by the Women and Culture Group showed a level of depth and maturity, whether from the perspective of the topics researched or the methodologies used. However, after three years, the group disbanded and its activities ceased.

## Final remarks

What is noteworthy in reviewing the characteristics and features of Islamic feminism in Egypt is the number of problems with which it has had to contend. The first is that despite the subject's importance, the number of Islamic feminist studies in Egypt is very limited, especially when compared to the large number of Islamic feminist studies produced in English outside the Arab world. The second problem is the extent of the impact this production of knowledge and these studies have had on the cultural, social and political contexts. In other words, how has the Islamic feminist discourse affected the official religious one? Has it succeeded in reaching the public through the media? Are different social classes aware of the efforts by feminist researchers to reinterpret the Qur'an and produce an alternative body of knowledge, or has this effort been linked to an elitist discourse confined to the narrow class of academics?

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* American University of Cairo, Egypt, Women and Memory.

1. To track Islamic feminism's development in the Muslim world and the term's development in the late twentieth century, see Margot Badran (2005), 'Between secular and Islamic feminisms:

reflections on the Middle East and beyond', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1 (Winter), pp. 6–28; Shahrazad Mojab (1998), 'Theorizing the politics of Islamic feminism', *The Realm of the Possible: Middle Eastern Women in Political and Social Spaces. The Feminist Review*, Winter 2001, pp. 124–46.

2. Dalal al-Bizri (2007), '*alniswiya alislamiya aw aljihad alhaw'i: al-mar'ah almuslimah tanshat fil gharb...*' (Islamic feminism or gender jihad: Muslim women active in the West...), *alhayat*, London, January, 13, p. 36.

3. Omaima Abou-Bakr and Shirin Shukri (2002), *almar'a walgender: ilgha' altamyeez althaqafi walijtima'i baynal jinsayn* (Women and Gender: Eliminating Cultural and Social Discrimination between the Sexes) (Damascus: dar al-fikr al-mu'aser), p. 52.

4. Azza Karam (2000), *nisa' did nisa': alnisa' walharakat alislamiya waldawla* (Women against Women: Women, the Islamist Movements and the State), translated by Shahrat al-Aalam (Cairo: kitab sotoor), pp. 257–9.

5. For more details on Dr Nawal El Saadawi's work and her clear stand in favour of international points of reference, and rejection of religious references, see her article in *almar'a waldeen walakhlaq* (Women, Religion and Morality) (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr, 2000).

6. Omaima Abou-Bakr (2007), *alniswiya alislamiya bayna ishkaliyat aldakhel walkharej* (Islamic Feminism between the Internal and External Problems), *tayibah*, June, pp. 92–3.

7. Omaima Abou-Bakr (forthcoming) '*qira'ah fi tafaseer alkoran wa'ya li i'tibarat algender*' (An understanding of Qur'anic interpretations conscious of gender considerations), *alniswiya waldirasat al diniya*, translated by Randa Abou-Bakr, *Feminist Translations Series* (Cairo: Women and Memory).

8. To better understand Omaima Abou-Bakr's research track and how she studies and understands history, see '*qira'a fi tareekh adabiyat alislam*' (A reading in the history of Islamic literature), in Hoda Elsadda, Wasimah Ramadan and Omaima Abou-Bakr (eds.), *zaman alnisa' walthakira albadila* (The Age of Women and Alternative Memory) (Cairo: almar'a walthakira); '*almuhadithat fil tareekh alislami*' (Factors of modernization in Islamic history), *hagar* 6(5) (1988); Qadriya Hussein's 'Introduction', in *shahirat alnisa fil aalam alislami* (Famous Women in the Muslim World) (Cairo: almar'a walthakira, 2004); '*tafseer altafseer: halat rabi'ah aladawiya*' (The exegesis of the exegesis: The case of Rabi'ah al Adawiya), *hagar* (1992). To understand her view on women's interpretation of Islamic religious and historical tradition, see Mervat Hatem (2006), 'In the eye of the storm: Islamic societies and Muslim women in globalization discourses', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 26, pp. 22–35.

9. For more information on feminist-conscious historical studies in the West, see Hoda Al-Saadi, '*almar'a almuslima: intaj almaarifa bayn almahali walaalami*' (The Muslim woman: the production of knowledge between the local and the international), Conference on the Production of Knowledge in the Arab World, Cairo, July 2007.

10. Omaima Abou-Bakr (2004), '*surat alrajol fil kitabat alislamiya: bayn altafaseer alqadeema walhaditha*' (The image of men in Islamic texts: between old and new interpretations), in Aisha Taymour: *tahadiyat althabet walmutaghayer walwatan* (Aisha Taymour: The challenges of the Fixed and the Changeable in the Nation) (Cairo: al-mar'a wal thakira).

11. Amani Saleh (2000), '*nahua manthoor islami lil-maarifa alniswiya*' (Feminist epistemology: towards an Islamic perspective), *Women and Culture*, 1, pp. 7–9.

12. *Women and Culture*, 2 (2002), p. 3.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

## CHAPTER 29

### Islamic Feminism: A New Feminist Movement or a Strategy by Women for Acquiring Rights?\*

*Amal Grami\*\**

This article focuses on the phenomenon of Islamic feminism. It provides a detailed summary of the defining theories and objectives of the movement, and its role in contributing to raising awareness and as an agent for change as well. It highlights the expanding boundaries of the phenomenon and the implications this has had on its content, orientation and role in a world where globalization and Islamophobia are affecting the process of developing Islamic feminism. The article traces the factors that contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism and explores how these interacted to produce the phenomenon in the changing contexts. It analyses the inherent problems in the movement and its argument from a critical point of view. The article concludes by asking a number of questions that help in understanding the nature and the limitations of Islamic feminism, its role, social, religious, political and academic implications.

#### **Introduction**

Every now and then, the current of anti-modernization issues new and questionable notions and terms, such as the ‘Islamic Declaration for Human Rights’, ‘Islamic Democracy’, ‘Islamic Socialism’ and so on. The creation of such new formulations is, however, not limited to this current; the Islamic world is at the receiving end of an onslaught of Islam-related concepts and terms, such as ‘Islamophobia’, ‘gender *jihad*’ and others.

The most recent of these is ‘Islamic feminism’, which is defined as a cross-border movement that brings together all Muslim women seeking to

‘redefine their identity in a more genuinely modern manner that befits their religion and culture’.<sup>1</sup> The women involved insist on their rights and refuse to sacrifice them for the benefit of hard-line fundamentalism.

The geographic area of Islamic feminism has expanded to include North America, a number of Asian, African, Arab and European countries, in addition to individual women from various backgrounds and professions who decided to join the movement. Some of these women lived under colonial rule and witnessed national struggles, while others did not; some are veiled, others are not; some are Muslims from the heartland; others are from the diaspora; some are Arab Muslims, some are non-Arab. The movement’s leaders see this variety as an asset, symbolizing a break in the psychological barrier that forms an obstacle between activists on women’s issues from different backgrounds, in light of the fact that secular feminists have often had difficulties dealing with Islamic activists, and vice versa. Moreover, the movement’s leaders believe that, by virtue of its establishment in both Eastern and Western worlds, Islamic feminism has succeeded in overcoming the East–West dichotomy.

Those who follow the writings and statements of the movement’s members<sup>2</sup> realize that some openly declare their allegiance to it and believe in its objectives, while others accept its main principles but are embarrassed by its name, and try to justify their position. However, despite their different fields of expertise<sup>3</sup> and geographic and cultural backgrounds, these women are united by the fact that they belong to the generation that benefited the most from education, and have therefore an awareness of their rights, albeit at varying levels.

## **Coining the term and the problems it raises**

A number of factors, some political, others ideological or cultural, contributed to the movement’s rise, and the variations between those it encompasses are explained by the differences in their respective host countries. These variations include:

- the level of education, participation in the labour force and the general acumen, especially in religious knowledge, of the women in that country; and

- the fact that feminism is limited to only a few countries because of problems with its implementation, plus the voices calling for a reconsideration of its principles and, indeed, for related activities to be curtailed.

There are also problems arising from differences among feminist activists themselves, from their wide dispersal and their disparate ideological leanings, declared objectives and strategies.

As for the factors that led to the rise of Islamic feminism, they include:

- The ever-expanding Islamist movements and their success in attracting women as they gain dominance in the public arena and infiltrate all state institutions. There is a new generation of Islamist women known for their daring and confrontational style as regards the role and status of women in an Islamic state. Women activists insist that Islam is in harmony with the principle of human rights for women established by the United Nations, and cast doubts on the mainstream women's liberation movement which they believe has failed to address these rights, or promote the status of women both within the family and in society at large.
- The feeling among Muslims that the 'clash of civilizations' is raging between the West and Islam, especially in those countries where Muslims form a minority.
- The desire by observant Muslim women to resist religious fundamentalism (especially in light of the Taliban regime's treatment of women, and the spread of terrorism) via a global feminist movement that promotes a tolerant Islam; an Islam that honours women rather than humiliates them. There is a strong and growing sense among women across the world, and some fair-minded men, that there is stark injustice and discrimination against women in conventional historical social settings.<sup>4</sup>
- The diminishing number of supporters of secular feminism and the difficulties of recruiting new and younger members on account of the distortions associated with the term in Muslim societies. Feminism is deemed a foreign, Western concept intent on Westernizing society and changing existing social, cultural and political arrangements. It is seen as an excuse for Western feminists to interfere in Islamic societies

through various United Nations and other organizations, a perception that has led to the isolation of feminists from the general public.

- That women's non-governmental organizations are no longer an effective force in several countries; they remain elitist, and suffer from a shortage of funds and poor public support. They are accused of giving international agencies authoritative priority over religious sources. In addition, they are subject to surveillance by the central authorities, which curtail their activities.
- The frustration felt by a number of feminist and leftist leaders accused of enmity towards their own religion and countries, and of collaboration with Western imperialism, forcing some women to gravitate towards other ideologies.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to define the term 'Islamic feminism'<sup>6</sup> due to the lack of a specific, clear and agreed-upon definition of feminism per se. Researchers belonging to the Islamic movement have not given this problem due attention; the most one can say about it is that the term is derived from the root word 'female', and has a set of roles or purposes assigned to it. It is a mechanism with which to analyse society and history, and to use as a tool to rectify current injustices towards women. It is also a reformist strategy that aims at changing existing social structures.

The term 'Islam' is similarly unclear and ill-defined in this context, making it difficult for researchers to know what the feminists exactly mean by it. Is it the religious doctrine of Islam, the historical practice of the religion or the Islam imagined through the reading of texts?

Those who follow the discourse revolving around Islamic feminism cannot but notice the differences among activists as to which Arabic term to use as a counterpart to Islamic feminism. Amani Saleh identifies herself as belonging to Islamic feminism based on 'commitment to the doctrine before commitment to the feminine persona'.<sup>7</sup> A number of researchers use the term 'feminist Islam', while others insist on crediting Islamic feminism for their work.

Alternatively, objections to the term Islamic feminism are manifest in secular feminists' rejection of any link between feminism and Islam, on account of their very different historical records. Moreover, although some women researchers have tried to root the concept of feminism in Islamic culture, the process has only exposed the disparate authorities that inform

each term, and the lack of compatibility between them. Islam is a religious doctrine, while feminism is an international, legal civil movement that rejects the incorporation of religion into movements of struggle. How can one reconcile a faith and a legal movement? Some believe that marrying these two opposites is inappropriate and irresponsible.<sup>8</sup> It is not only secular feminists who voice objections in this regard; a number of Islamicist activists reject the name given the movement on the grounds that Western feminism is incompatible with cultural and social conditions in Muslim societies. Even if we try to confer on feminism an Islamic character, it would still be inappropriate, if only because the term Islamic feminism was coined in the West then imposed on the Arab world.<sup>9</sup> Heba Raouf Ezzat accepts the movement's underlying theses and believes that women have not achieved the rights Islam has granted them, though she rejects the term Islamic feminism because, as she sees it, feminism is in opposition with religion, and is an aspect of what the West represents in terms of domination, colonialism and hegemony. She suggests that the term Islamic feminism be replaced by 'Islamic Women's Movement'.<sup>10</sup> Azizah al-Hibri's position is not unlike that of Heba Raouf Ezzat, given her deliberate attempts to distinguish herself from American feminists by virtue of her belonging to an Islamic communal setup and expressing a woman's point of view.<sup>11</sup> Thus the term Islamic Feminism raises a number of theoretical problems, among which are the following:

- If Western feminism went through a number of historical stages, each with its own set of characteristics and theories, and then branched out into more specific movements such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism, radical feminism and environmental feminism, then which feminism are we talking about in the Arab world? Is Islamic feminism a branch of Western feminism? If what is meant by Islamic feminism is that which concerns Muslim women, then does its establishment signal a shift in the course of both Western and Arab feminism?
- If feminism was at the core a political movement with social objectives before becoming a social movement aiming to prove women's independence, highlight their role in life and defend their rights, does conferring the depiction of 'Islamic' on 'feminism' signify a confinement of the movement's activities, and attempts to limit the scope of its theoretical framework to suit visions prevailing in Muslim



societies? Western and Islamic societies each have their own form of feminism that best suits their particular characteristics and current historical context, a context in which fundamentalism has become a fact of life.

- Islamic feminism points to issues of understanding and misunderstanding,<sup>12</sup> on the one hand welcoming and receiving Western terminology and, on the other hand, eliminating it from its own natural habitat, and recognizing the changes it underwent in the different environments that embraced it. Should the concept therefore be adapted to an Arab cultural habitat?
- If Muslim immigrant women who adhere to Islamic feminism defend their rights of expression, thought and belief, and the gains they have acquired under systems that respect their full and equal citizenship, to what extent are they able to associate themselves with the Islamic discourse currently prevailing in Arab countries? Does that not raise the issue of the presence of several brands of Islam, and of differences between European and American Islam, on the one hand, and Arab Islam, on the other?
- If differences over the term have led to confusion and to a lack of clarity, particularly in the Arab world, do differences over terminology necessarily mean differences in visions and objectives based on existing disparities between society and women activists?

## **Theories and declared objectives**

Women researchers disagree on whether the Qur'an should be the only source of legal and moral authority, or both the Qur'an and the *sunna* (rules of practice) together, added to the reliance on international human rights principles. The following are some of the bases on which the theoretical framework of Islamic feminism rests; this list does not necessarily imply consensus on or commensurability between the various factors:<sup>13</sup>

- Rejection of the theoretical framework through which the issue of women's liberation was addressed: Muslim women are capable of liberating themselves without identifying with the Western model of the ideal woman.

- The beliefs that patriarchal traditions inherited from the *jahiliya* (the pre-Islamic period in Arab history) period, rather than from Islam, are to blame for the deterioration of women's condition. Islam granted Muslim women rights that other religions have deprived them of, and this religion is fully capable of liberating women once it is correctly understood. The adjustment of women's condition can be achieved from within Islam. It is within this context that the theory of Islamic feminism comes as a response to radical Western feminism and its modernizing model, a context that renders Muslim women's demands entirely different from those of Western feminists.
- Rejection of the central role granted to men, and the belief that religion developed from a purely male perspective that needs to be unveiled to expose the discrimination lurking in its discourse, and in the public mindset. Not only should the self-interests of men be analysed and exposed, but also setups that allow them to dominate, and the various means used to subjugate women should be condemned. Discrimination against women is the outcome of a poor and literal understanding of religious texts, a skewed reading that favours the (im)balance of power and social interests.<sup>14</sup>
- Attempts by women to rediscover themselves and their abilities in view of forging their own identity: it is illogical for women to identify themselves with the male persona and see it as a model.<sup>15</sup> Women's increasing awareness of themselves and their growing confidence in their abilities will open the doors of religious scholarship to them. Criticism should be directed here at religious leaders who produced a fundamentalist Islamic discourse, and at Islamist women propagandists who see women's liberation as a Western concept (Zainab al-Ghazali and Safinaz Kathem, among others), rather than independently interpreting religious texts relevant to women. Women belonging to the Islamic feminist movement do not raise their voices only to protest and criticize: they call for the doors of independent interpretation to be open to women well versed in religious matters and in the laws to advance their cause, spread the culture of independent interpretation, and increase the number of female religious scholars and interpreters. Contemporary Muslim women researchers should focus on doctrinal analysis, undertake a comprehensive review of religious laws, revive the movement of religious independent interpretation and propose

alternative doctrinal interpretations. Saleh believes that the issue of independent interpretation reflects a comprehensive cultural vision of life, and is 'an inescapable issue imposed by the qualitative change in the status of women in society, and in their abilities and potential'.<sup>16</sup> In addition, the changes in consciousness and awareness make symbols and meaning susceptible to time and place, a fact that compels the researcher to review all systems at the basis of religious laws, Islamic jurisprudence, analogy and consensus.

- Underlining the importance of re-examining Islam in the interests of developing an Islamic women's liberation theory. This is a project that can only be achieved through independent interpretation, a redefinition of textual bases and traditional values, and through a diligent re-examination of Islamic history.<sup>17</sup> This is why adherents of Islamic feminism are hard at work rereading texts, and analysing the social and cultural bases at the core of the injustice to women. They are intent on coming up with a new religious discourse that addresses women's issues according to the true commandments of Islam. It is not a secret that men are responsible for barring women from religious positions or practices, such as barring them from issuing *fatwas* (religious decrees) and from acting as *ma'thoun* (an authorized religious figure), to prevent them from revealing to the public the real foundation of religious laws. Justice will be done to women when human history is separated from foundational Islamic texts. As to feminists living abroad, like Amina Wadud and Riffat Hassan, not only do they oppose male-based interpretations and focus on concepts relevant to the family and society, but also they devote their writing to advocate the separation of the Qur'an from the *hadith*. Riffat Hassan says: 'The Koran is fairer in matters of gender, yet most Islamic rulings unfair to women are drawn from the *hadith*'.<sup>18</sup>
- The need to distinguish between the *sharia*, a firm religious basis with its own unequivocal legal rulings, divinely decreed, and rulings based on interpretation, a human product sensitive to shifting social considerations.
- Calling for the reinstitution of women's neglected and lost rights, and their liberation from social pressures and obligations incompatible with the spirit of Islam. There should be justice for women, who should be allowed to enjoy God's justice based on a universal Islamic

system that gives women genuine rights. Beyond doubt, upholding gender equity the Islamic way, together with the notions of human,<sup>19</sup> moral and religious equality, would replace the call for full gender equality.

- The fact that some of the movement's adherents see Islamic feminism as a means of salvation from the conundrum in which Islamic thought finds itself. It is the 'third way', the 'alternative discourse', even a change in feminism itself and a shift in its authoritative sources made possible by the crystallization of a feminist religious discourse, based on Islamizing terminology borrowed from feminist thought. Talk would shift to Islamizing empowerment; gender and gender *jihad*... and Western feminism would no longer be focused on itself, or on promoting its Orientalist discourse.

The movement has succeeded in activating the role of women in the religious domain and allowing them to propose reinterpretations for a number of verses (*ayas*) that specifically concern women, like *diyya* (payment of restitution money), *shahadah* (profession of faith) and *mahr* (dowry). It has also allowed them to submit different points of view on matters such as *qawwamah* (men's authority over women),<sup>20</sup> *ta'a* (obedience), *tafadol* (granting the man double the woman's inheritance), *nushuz* (the wife's stubbornness and disobedience), *wilaya* (guardianship), *taklif* (religious obligations), *khilafah* (caliphate), *'adl* (justice) and *darb* (wife-beating). They have been able to delve into the discourse woven around women's issues and reconsider a number of inherited notions harmful to women, like *alihitbas* (men's right to restrain women) and *nikah* (the marriage contract and its conditions). Women researchers in this field have also reviewed a number of concepts, and examined their interconnectedness and their linkages to the holistic values in the foundational text, using the concept of gender as a guide. Delving thus into the study of Muslim religious heritage from a female perspective<sup>21</sup> is similar to what Jewish and Christian women have done to come up with a feminist theology using new media outlets. Therefore, it is not strange to see an interaction between studies through publication on the web and social media such as Facebook and blogs. Reactions to Islamic feminism from both within and without the Muslim world have varied. Attitudes towards it seem to have fallen into one of the following categories.

First, from the very beginning, some have entirely rejected the currency of the term in Arabic and severely criticized the movement, which conservative and fundamentalist Islamists perceive to be a symbol of Westernization. The West has already invaded the Muslim nation culturally through secular feminism, they believe, and here it is today doing the same through Islamic feminism.<sup>22</sup> It is a movement that does a disservice to the nation because its cause centres around feminine identity, encourages individuality and is belligerent towards men. The conservatives criticize feminist researchers for lacking the expertise necessary to study religion and accurately interpret religious texts, especially since some of them do not even know Arabic, the language of the Qur'an.<sup>23</sup> Many men oppose Islamic feminism because it threatens the privileges they enjoy in a patriarchal society, and some women oppose it because, by calling for a change in gender roles, it deprives them of the protection of men.<sup>24</sup> Alternatively, and broadly in keeping with the conservative response, legal activists and leftists believe that Islamic feminism exercises double standards; it takes advantage of the political and cultural vacuum left behind by the retreat of secular thought, the left and liberalism, to formulate a compromise to religious discourse. This discourse vilifies Western feminism while using its mechanisms in its analyses, and dresses it up in religious garb. Dalal al-Bizri says that 'Islamic Feminism has inherited all the trappings of activist Western feminism, but turned its back on it and said it was Islam'.<sup>25</sup> In turn, Mu'taz al-Khatib believes that Islamic feminism wilfully 'introduced the concept of gender feminism to Islamic history'.<sup>26</sup>

The second attitude is moderate and accepts the movement's particularistic relevance and what it stands for, despite disagreeing with it on a number of issues. This response considers it wrong to pass hasty judgements on the movement before it is sufficiently analysed. While seeing no particular importance in the term Islamic feminism, those in this category nonetheless do want to evaluate the service it renders to society.

The third broad response has been to welcome the movement's creation, adopt its theories and help spread it further afield, since, according to this view, there is no harm in dealing with Western concepts. Arab civilization was built on an encounter between cultures (Greek, Byzantine, Roman, etc.) and Arab feminism has, for example, always been linked to several discourses including the secular, the national and the popular. Most

importantly, Islamic feminism is rooted in true Islam and the Qur'an's spirit of equality, and for women it represents a credible political voice.<sup>27</sup> It will give a strong boost to women's activism by conferring on it a religious character, and furthermore will bolster the efforts of enlightened Muslims who are trying hard to paint a different picture of Islam and Muslims. Islamic feminism has succeeded in transforming the principles of gender equality and justice into tangible realities on the ground,<sup>28</sup> and in changing the prevailing defeatist mentality. It has given a number of women the power to speak on their own behalf and to represent themselves, expressing, similar to men, their own understanding of the religious matter. It is evident that each of the above attitudes, whether rejectionist, conditional or welcoming, belongs to one of several cultural, political, social and ideological backgrounds.

## **Conclusion**

An examination of the bases on which the Islamic feminist movement was founded compels one to make the following remarks:

- A lack of interest by most researchers in offering a precise definition of the term, and the differences between them regarding its narrative, helped spawn a variety of terms that have been either ascribed to the movement or revolved in its orbit (Islamic feminism, feminist Islam, Muslim feminism, feminism and Islam, religious feminism, feminist Muslim women, etc.). Some see these terms as synonymous, while others see them as a sign of the confusion between terms such as feminist and feminine, Islamic and Islamist.<sup>29</sup> This accounts for the slow pace of the dissemination of the movement in the Arab world.
- The large geographic area covered by Islamic feminism revealed characteristics associated with individual movements in different countries. The history of Islamic feminism in Iran, for example, is particular to the Iranian women's experience in a political culture that makes it difficult for feminism to evolve.<sup>30</sup> It is an activist feminism based on negotiations and linked to politics and religious scholarship. In North America, Islamic feminism has its own characteristics drawn from the experience of a small minority, and the same could be said

about other forms of feminism, such as Latin American feminism, Jewish feminism or African feminism.

- The movement is based on the principle of selectivity which allows it to take from Western feminism what it chooses, benefiting even from the criticism levelled at it and at post-modernism, and taking from Islam what suits its purpose. This brings up the question: Is resorting to Islam not a form of opportunism? Does the movement's claim to a noble heritage, and the search for shining female models from within this, not place it in the shadow of reliance and dependency – that is, does it not indicate that the movement, having failed to break its own chains and run free, relies instead on past achievements? Is resorting to feminism not itself a function of convenience? Is the tendency to compromise not tantamount to reneging on the call by the first generation of feminists, in several Islamic societies, to separate the religious from the temporal? Is this concocted and compromising course not a sign of a pervasive split personality – that is, adopting certain aspects of modernity while rejecting others and attempting to create a home-grown modernity not in line with the Western model?
- Accordingly, does this not reflect the state of disarray in which we currently find ourselves, a state in which we waver between the inside and the outside, wisdom and imitation, etc.?
- Is pinning the blame for the situation of women on the interpreters, ignoring political, economic and historical considerations, and ignoring also the freedom of action women enjoyed before Islam, and searching for female models – is not all this simply dressing discrimination and unfairness in the garb of equality and is it not a ruse similar to the one used by old religious scholars to find a way around the dogma? Moreover, are protestations about shining models and the return to the original understanding of the Qur'an guaranteed to address all women's issues? What does one do when the religious text allows discrimination in line with patriarchal social structures?
- The movement's leaders believe in the role the religious factor can play in strengthening the socio-cultural role of women and empowering them in the public sphere. The ensuing discourse therefore focuses on the need to activate the role of Muslim women, especially those engaged in independent interpretation. What is required is a new generation of Muslim female researchers well versed

in religious matters. However, does this not lead to discrimination among women from the same society along religious lines? Are we not witnessing discrimination between secular Muslim researchers who are culturally Muslim, and practising Muslim researchers? Is the movement not elitist in its choices and objectives, given its tilt towards 'female religious scholars' at the expense of others leading to its isolation from reality?

- Does focusing on the belief that there is no salvation for women except through the reliance on religion not reduce women's entire existence to their religious identity, and place religion at the core of theoretical and practical concerns instead of making women the focus of attention? Is this attitude not a negation of the achievements of those women who had the courage of their convictions, and the ability to challenge others in defence of their rights and freedoms?<sup>31</sup> Moreover, casting the cause of women in a purely religious framework goes along with the belief that 'Islam is the solution', and entrusts the responsibility of addressing women's grievances to the religious establishment rather than the state and/or civil laws. Focusing on reinterpretation sidelines the social, economic and political factors as well as other gender-related issues.
- Is this recently concocted term, feminist Islam or Islamic feminism, especially in Arab countries, not defensive in nature – a response to the West where stereotypical images of Islam and of Muslim women abound – and a response to political Islam? Islamic feminist leaders allude to men's fears at a time when combining feminism and Islam gives the impression that women have fears as well, compelling them to look for a way out. The fear of being accused of loyalty to the West and serving its interests has compelled them to dress their feminism in Islamic garb, to absolve themselves of guilt and find a firm stronghold. However, the spread of the term feminist Islam also reveals Muslim women's fear of hard-line fundamentalism, a fear that compels them to distinguish their movement from others by expressing women's demands from under the umbrella of enlightened Islam.
- Islamic feminism brings up issues related to identity formation and the means of expressing it, especially as regards feminine identity and anti-Western discourse that perceive women as the symbol of cultural



identity. Islamic feminism may express a view in which religious identity predominates over all other forms.

- If the practice of feminism is a manifestation of modernity, then Islamic feminism could signal the presence of a problematic relationship with modern thought, and a misunderstanding of the discourses woven around difference, otherness, democracy, pluralism, citizenship, equality, secularism and so on.

Islamic feminism claims to have succeeded in attracting all Muslim women under the same umbrella, bringing them together behind a single project and building a network of solidarity. However, the language one hears reveals the presence of at least two separate camps: Muslim women who write in English and those who write in Arabic. To what extent do they coordinate their work, and how much do they read each other's work, exchange information and examine together the methodologies each has adopted? The same question applies to issues currently under debate, for a difference is found between the demands made by Muslim women in Islamic majority countries and the issues posed by immigrant Muslim women.<sup>32</sup> The rise of Islamic feminism and the globalization of its discourse indicate the presence of different ways of addressing women's issues, at different times and in the presence of several reformist social movements. Whether it is an intellectual exercise, a generational fad or an intellectual adventure not yet fully mature, *Islamic* feminism is, in my opinion, a telling manifestation of post-modern thought. We sense behind the Islamic feminist movement how terminology travels from one place to another, how it is coloured by the culture it comes in contact with, and based on the women's experience, their social class and their readiness to resist and fight for their rights. The most important among those is intellectual freedom, and the freedoms of expression and religious belief. In light of the pervasiveness of *takfir* in many countries, the close contact between secular and Islamic women becomes a symbol of the violence aimed at both the activists<sup>33</sup> and the manner in which they confront political Islam and official or state feminism. The absence of Islamic feminism in North Africa (except for the westernmost part of the maghreb) is perhaps a sign of the difficulty it has infiltrating certain societies, especially Arab societies, due to various reasons and considerations. In Tunisia, for example, we found that the family and personal status law's interest in

Tunisian women's issues has mitigated the need to join such movements. However, the rise of an Islamic feminist movement in that country should not come as a surprise in light of the apparent influences impacting the young generation, especially fundamentalist ideology, not to mention the general historical–political atmosphere and the voices calling for multiple and 'urfi (unofficial) marriages, voices that see no shame in beating women. The question is to what extent can women interact with these changing realities and negotiate over their fate? How many concessions can Muslim women make? Are women tough enough and can they design strategies capable of confronting the extreme fundamentalism threatening to thwart their achievements and relegate them once again to the harem?

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* University of Manouba, Tunis, Tunisia.

1. Yvonne Yazbek Haddad and John L. Esposito (2003), *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, translated by Amal Sharqi (Amman: al-Ahliya), p. 13.

2. Among those who belong to this movement is the group of Iranian men and women inside Iran who produce *Zanan* magazine, founded in 1992. The group includes Shahla Sherkat, Ziba Mir-Hosseini, Afsaneh Najmabadi and Val Moghadam, as well as a number of Iranian women in the diaspora such as Nayereh Tohidi. There is also Amina Wadud Mohsen, Leila Ahmed, Azizah al-Hibri in the United States; Asma Barlas and Arifa Mazhar in Pakistan; Yesim Arat, Feride Acar and Nilufer Gole in Turkey; Fatima Mernissi, Asma Lamrabet and Rachida Ait Himmich in Morocco; Amani Saleh, Hind Mustafa and Omaima Abou-Bakr in Egypt; and the 'Sisters in Islam' in Malaysia, in addition to a number of men who support the movement.

3. Among adherents to this movement are experts in Islamic and legal studies, political sciences and sociology.

4. Amani Saleh (2002), 'qadiyat al-naw' fil Qur'an: manthoomat al zawjiya bayna qutbay algender walqawwamah' (The gender issue in the Qur'an: marriage laws between gender and Qawwamah), *Women and Civilisation*, 3 (October), p. 17.

5. Safinaz Kathem, the Islamist writer, became an anti-feminist and an extreme critic of feminist principles; Dawn Chatty and Annika Rabo (1997) (2001), *Organizing Women: Formal and Informal Women's Groups in the Middle East*, translated by Mu'in al-Imam (Cairo: Berg), p. 239.

6. Margot Badran used the term in 1999 in 'Towards Islamic feminisms: a look at the Middle East', in Asma Afsaruddin (ed.), *Hermeneutics and Honor*, pp. 159–88 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press).

7. Amani Saleh (2004), 'ishkaliyat tanazo' alhawiya 'indal bahithat almuslimat fi majal almar'a' (Identity problems among Muslim women researching women's issues), *aljosour* (electronic magazine), p. 15.

8. Valentine M. Moghadam (2000), 'Islamic feminism and its discontents: notes on a debate', *Iran Bulletin*, available at [http://www.iran-bulletin.org/women/Islamic\\_feminism\\_IB.html](http://www.iran-bulletin.org/women/Islamic_feminism_IB.html), accessed 30 July 2013.

9. Hussein abu-al-Sibaa' (2006), 'alislam alniswi wa ishkaliyat aljunusa walidiologia' (Feminist Islam and the problems of sexuality and ideology), *al-arabiya. net*, 18 June.

10. Heba Raouf Ezzat (2008), Blog, 27 February, available at [www.onislam.net/arabic/blogs/heba-raouf/104881-2008-02-27%2016-28-25.html](http://www.onislam.net/arabic/blogs/heba-raouf/104881-2008-02-27%2016-28-25.html), accessed 30 July 2013.
11. Azizah al-Hibri (ed.) (1982), *Women and Islam* (Oxford: Pergamon); Azizah al-Hibri (2000), 'An introduction to Muslim women's rights', in Gisela Webb (ed.), *Windows of Faith* (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press), pp. 51–71, available at <http://karamah.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/An-Introduction-to-Muslim-Womens-Rights.pdf>, accessed 30 July 2013.
12. Fundamentalists see feminism as a call to uncover, get rid of the *hijab*, allow social relations between men and women, liberate women from having to abide by Muslim tenets and codes of behaviour, limit divorce, outlaw multiple marriages, demand an equal share of the inheritance and establish Western or irreligious secularism in Muslim countries, whereby religion would have no role to play in people's private social lives (see *al-nabaa* homepage).
13. For more information, see the 'Islamic women's manifesto', in Ireen Dubel and Karen Vintges (eds) (2006), *Feminism and Fundamentalism* (Amsterdam: SWP Humanistics University Press), pp. 75–7.
14. Asma Barlas (2002), *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press).
15. Nouchine Yavari-d'Hellencourt (1999), 'Le Feminisme poste-Islamiste en Iran', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée*, 85–6, pp. 99–119.
16. Saleh, 'ishkaliyat tanazo' alhawiya 'indal bahithat almuslimat fimajal almar'a'.
17. Chatty and Rabo, *Organizing Women*, p. 239.
18. Mu'taz al Khatib (2005), *alniswiya alislamiya waltahayuzat althukuriya... kanamuthaj tafsiri* (Islamic feminism and male biases!), *al-Hayat*, 21 June, available at <http://www.onislam.net/arabic/adam-eve/women-voice/88406-2005-07-03%2000-00-00.html>, accessed 3 July 2005; see also Amina Wadud (1999), *Qur'an and Women: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Women's Perspective* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
19. Margot Badran (2006), 'International Islamic feminism revisited', in Ireen Dubel and Karen Vintges (eds), *Women, Feminism and Fundamentalism* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers).
20. Saleh, 'qadiyat alnaw' fil Qur'an', pp. 45–51; Yazbek Haddad and Esposito, *Islam, Gender, and Social Change*, pp. 107–8.
21. al-Hibri, *Women and Islam*; al-Hibri, 'An introduction to Muslim women's rights'.
22. Badran, 'International Islamic feminism revisited'; Moghadam, 'Islamic feminism and its discontents'.
23. For more information, see Marie Chatry-Komarel (2007), *Existe-t-il un feminisme musulman?* (Paris: L'Harmattan).
24. Badran, 'International Islamic feminism revisited'.
25. Dalal al Bizri (2004), "'alniswiya alislamiya": irth lil hadatha fi itar almarja'iyah' ('Islamic feminism': Inherited modernity in the framework of authority), *Al Hayat Daily*, London, 29 August 2004.
26. al-Khatib, 'alniswiya alislamiya waltahayuzat althukuriya'.
27. Amal Mohammad al-Malki (n.d.), 'alnashitat alniswiyat almuslimat yumayzna baynal islam walmuslminin' (Islamic feminist activists distinguish between Islam and Muslims). See also al-Khatib, 'alniswiya alislamiya waltahayuzat althukuriya'. English version available at [www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=25138&lan=en&sp=0](http://www.commongroundnews.org/article.php?id=25138&lan=en&sp=0), accessed 30 July 2013.
28. Margot Badran believes that feminism has succeeded in gaining a number of concessions in Egypt, Morocco, South Africa and elsewhere; Margot Badran (2000), 'Exploring Islamic feminism', Talk at Wilson Center, Washington, DC, 30 November.
29. For the confusion between *Islamic* and *Islamist*, see, for example, posts on [www.Kabyles.net](http://www.Kabyles.net).
30. Yavari-d'Hellencourt, 'Le Feminisme poste-Islamiste en Iran', pp. 99–119.
31. The *hijab*'s removal has been considered a symbolic gesture for Iranian women since 1918; for Egyptian women returning from the Rome Conference in 1923; and for Tunisian women in 1924; as

was the burning of the *abayas* in Kuwait in 1963.

32. Ceylan Pektas-Weber (2006), 'Dutch Muslim women and fundamentalism: experience, results and strategies', in Ireen Dubel and Karen Vintges (eds), *Feminism and Fundamentalism* (Amsterdam: Humanistics University Press); Anissa Helie (2006), 'Muslim women and feminist strategies in times of religious fundamentalism', in Ireen Dubel and Karen Vintges (eds), *Women, Feminism and Fundamentalism* (Amsterdam: SWP Publishers), pp. 141–54; Moghadam, 'Islamic feminism and its discontents'.

33. Yavari-d'Hellencourt, '*Le Feminisme poste-Islamiste en Iran*', pp. 99–107.

## CHAPTER 30

### Trends and Directions in Contemporary Islamic Feminist Research\*

*Omaima Abou-Bakr\*\**

#### **What is Islamic feminism?**

One of the definitions of Islamic feminism is that it is, first, an attempt to use feminist awareness of the discrimination against women and of gender issues (the hierarchy between the sexes to establish a dominant class and a lower one) to monitor the concepts and phenomena that cultures and societies enshrine as part of Islam. Second, it means moving from awareness of a problem's existence and criticizing it, to proposing reforms and suggesting alternatives. This involves a diligent and wise reinterpretation of Islamic religious sources free of gender bias, and a return to the authentic message of Islam, namely the application of justice and respect for human dignity that equates between men and women. In other words, this means taking the gender perspective into account, considering the roles ascribed to men and women in the public and private domains, and integrating Muslim women's point of view, based on their daily life experiences, when translating the referential Islamic values into social, cultural and political facts on the ground. Gender should also be taken into account when interpreting what the religious doctrines and basic faith mean for the lives of Muslim men and women, and when eliminating the concepts of the superiority of men and the marginalization of women from the Islamic system. In brief, it is a feminism that both emanates from Islam's ideals and flows back into its interest as a religion.

The concept of Islamic feminism has passed through various stages since its current revival in the past 20 years – that is, since the name was given to

the Iranian activists' attempts, following the Islamic Revolution, to obtain their legal rights within the context of the Shi'i juristic system. This process was explained in detail by Haleh Afshar, one of the first scholars to attract attention to the cohesiveness of these feminists' deep religious commitment on the one hand, and, on the other, their strong awareness of their absent rights and the poor implementation of the Islamic *sharia*, which resulted in their using that same *sharia*, established by the Iranian Republic as an ideological reference point, to enact laws to further their own cause.<sup>1</sup> In other words it is, as Ziba Mir-Hosseini says, a real paradox because it was precisely the rise of political Islam that created the space necessary for an indigenous feminism to grow, representing the 'unwanted child' (i.e. the unexpected outcome) of the Islamic Revolution. The movement drew its political, legal, cultural and religious legitimacy from the revolution's ideology, but did so to crystallize its feminist policies and achieve legal rights and privileges.<sup>2</sup> The movement is, in my opinion (and in continuation of the metaphor), the legitimate child of the Islamic revivalist current, in general, and has the right to exist and grow – even if it is unwelcome and misunderstood.

In this initial Iranian context, women's feminist activism preceded the use of the name coined later to describe and analyse the phenomenon. In the phase that followed, we turned our attention to the name and its significance, and several opinions were voiced regarding its meaning, legitimacy and use in a sense that rejects any contradiction between feminist consciousness and the message of Islam. Gradually, the discussions resulted in theoretical contributions to explain the historical reasons behind the concept's emergence and the need for it today, to specify the fields of research and studies pertinent to this new domain, to analyse its ideas and assumptions, and to introduce the Muslim women researchers who adopted and applied it.<sup>3</sup>

In the Arab region, people remained occupied – especially in the public discourse – by the debate surrounding the term's relevance and the usefulness of the concept. Both the secular and religious currents were suspicious of it and rejected it because – in the opinion of the former – it is inevitably self-contradictory, and therefore vague and ambiguous, because Islamic *sharia* is based on clear legal differences and discrimination between men and women, while total equality and absolute freedom are neither conditional nor incomplete. The religious current believes, on the

other hand, that the mere fact that feminism is based on the philosophical principles of Western secularism and individualism renders it unworkable and unfitting to the Islamic perspective regarding the community and the *ummah*.<sup>4</sup> In all cases, we have still not overcome the stage of questioning the term, feeling a certain distaste for it and avoiding its use, even by those who are convinced of it. In the meantime, several studies by women researchers and academics – as well as a number of male researchers – outside the Arab world (in the West, Turkey, South-East Asia, South Africa, etc.) have transcended this initial phase and developed beyond having to justify the concept and the term. Different research areas were crystallized and developed in this growing specialization, and a new brand of dynamic Islamic scholarship emerged that sifts through the scholars' and jurists' traditional work, and offers alternatives based on exhaustive studies, informed reflection and commitment to the underlying tenets of the faith.

## **Research trajectories and major studies**

We can divide areas of research related to this field into four groups:

1. The group that began early to insist, repeatedly, on the principle of separating religion from culture – or the clear Islamic Qur'anic doctrines and the intent of *sharia* on the one hand, from the successive cultures that produced biased human understandings and unjust *fiqhi* interpretations on the other. Researchers such as Amina Wadud, Azizah al-Hibri and Riffat Hassan found that one of the ways to prove this is to reread specific Qur'anic verses that contain problematic concepts, as presented from the male *fiqhi* perspective, and reinterpret them to provide another understanding that does not discriminate against women in Islam, and that is compatible with its message of justice, equality and human dignity. It is in this from this perspective that Amina Wadud attempted to explicate the concept of '*darajah*' (*surat albaqarah*, 228), that Azizah al-Hibri refuted the juristic and cultural misunderstanding surrounding the concept of '*qawwamah*' (*surat alnisaa*, 34), and that Riffat Hassan discussed the Qur'an's depiction of Eve, all typical examples of this group's work.<sup>5</sup> It focuses on the Holy Qur'an's centrality as a divine text and an authentic consistent message, and highlights the differences between it and

jurisprudence, and between it and the patriarchal social cultures, and, finally, reveals the abuse of this referential text for authoritative and discriminatory ends.

2. The above type of research helped expand the field of hermeneutics to include the review, reinterpretation and rejection of associating patriarchy and male bias to the Qur'an through a series of more in-depth, comprehensive and theoretical studies, such as Asma Barlas' famous book in which she initiated 'unreading patriarchal interpretations of the Qur'an'.<sup>6</sup> Other researchers concentrated specifically on juristic and legal material from a perspective that takes into account all dimensions of gender – that is, the basis on which jurisprudence is built, and the assumptions of jurists, religious scholars and interpreters concerning stereotypical gender roles, and the unequal power relations between men and women.<sup>7</sup> Such writings continued self-consciously to ground their research in the tradition and define the epistemological dimension of the Islamic feminist project in a manner that could radically change contemporary religious discourses and the nature of new Islamic studies.<sup>8</sup>
3. Especially in the last ten years, several studies centred on specific terms and phrases in certain Qur'anic verses to follow the exegetical accumulations of their interpretation with the additions and readjustments they had acquired over time. Among these terms are 'ta'a' (obedience), 'nushuz' (disobedience), 'qiwamah' (men's authority over women), 'darajah' (degree), 'wilaya' (men's guardianship) and 'wadrubuhunna' (strike them), and other such complex notions.<sup>9</sup>
4. Studies that have the most serious implications and profound philosophical significance are those that address the methodological foundations and intellectual assumptions of the process of Qur'anic interpretation itself, and that speculate on wider methods and mechanisms of interpretation. These would take women researchers and interpreters out of the narrow confines of focusing on the specific meaning of a verse, a word or letter, to a larger domain where they can find guidance in the spirit of the text, and the more comprehensive and supreme divine intent. Some researchers are courageously discussing the limitedness of textual interpretation of certain verses and the failure of this justification-based method in solving the problems



associated with discriminatory concepts and rulings. An example is Amina Wadud who, in her latest book *Inside the Gender Jihad*,<sup>10</sup> advances the notion of sometimes having to transcend the sacred text's literal wording entirely and view it as a 'threshold' to cross over towards larger spaces or an open 'window' from which we gain access to other worlds. This is, of course, a more radical position than her previous one, since she is voicing here her 'objection' to the Qur'anic text and the need to transcend it to a post-text phase<sup>11</sup> by viewing it as a sign to go forward towards more developed avenues in keeping with modern times. In the same vein, Kecia Ali believes that the Qur'an itself sometimes directs us towards ignoring its literal application in order to implement justice.<sup>12</sup> She believes that as a revealed text manifested in the earthly realm, the Qur'an has a limited scope of implementation on the ground and thus remains a 'pale shadow of the ultimate Reality'<sup>13</sup> and a 'starting point' for humanity's moral development, rather than its end.<sup>14</sup> In my opinion, however, despite the potential benefit that such an interpretative methodology can bring, it takes us from the hard-line *salafi* extremism, which insists on a narrow, literal implementation, to the opposite extreme, which cripples and tears down the divine revelations, and voids the words of the Qur'an of any real content or serious meaning.

For his part, Khaled Abou El Fadl follows a more comprehensive methodology that disregards neither the Qur'anic text nor the juristic heritage, but uses a variety of well-balanced and reconciliatory methods. In addition to a close examination of juristic and interpretive views, of the *hadith*, the *sunna* (the Prophet's practices) and history, he proposes adopting the method of seeking 'that which is good/beautiful' as a supreme normative criterion to guide us during the process of understanding and reinterpretation, in line with this spirit inherent in Islam and God Almighty. Abou El Fadl also believes that if no convincing interpretation is reached based on the believer's sense of 'beauty' (justice and equality between men and women being a manifestation of this beauty, because it is right), we should take a temporary 'conscientious pause' during which we should refrain from passing a final judgement or deciding on a definitive interpretation. Instead, we should use the time to continue our reflection and striving (*ijtihad*) until we arrive at meanings characterized by 'beauty' and

justice, because neither logic, nor our moral sense and the conscientiousness faith can view justice except as a superior divine intent. In his book *A Conference of the Books: the Search for Beauty in Islam*, El Fadl follows a complex methodology that uses the above-mentioned criterion, alongside detailed juristic and exegetical scrutiny, to analyse the problem associated with the term ‘*wadrubuhunna*’ (*alnisaa*, 34).<sup>15</sup>

## Methodological questions

Based on the above, we can continue in the direction of further developments and explorations by asking more questions related to this growing field: is the objective solely to deconstruct, destabilize and undo the entire *fiqhi* and exegetical tradition, or is it more important to rebuild, reformulate concepts and offer new alternatives and bases guided by what is just, merciful and beautiful in Islam, in God Almighty and in the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him) himself? Do we follow the same methodology of the traditional scholars in their close and literal linguistic interpretation of each verse, expression and word – venturing in their main arena of action? Or are we, by doing that, re-inscribing the same ‘divisive’ and ‘separatist’ methodology that kept the *ulema* from applying the holistic principles of the *sharia* to the equality of women? Is it better for us to use the historicity of the revelations and the changing historical and cultural contexts of certain verses (such as those that relate to inheritance, testimony and *qawwamah*), and say that these reflect times and circumstances long gone, and therefore do not represent binding laws for the following societies? Does not the adoption of this developmental and progression-based principle lead to a worrisome and controversial outcome, namely the discontinuation of adhering to the revelations on the premise that their timeliness and social and cultural relevance have long been surpassed? Or should we start with broad generalities/absolutes, principles and intents, then interpret the verses accordingly and in their light? (For example, can we interpret the doctrine of ‘*tawhid*’ – the Oneness of God – as meaning obedience and submission only to God Almighty rather than to any human being? This would mean total equality among human beings in every respect, and that the Qur’an never presented the idea of instituting specific social roles for men and women, or a division of labour between the public and the private, but

rather the contrary: it imposed joint public action and social responsibility upon the faithful, be they men or women, as is clear in *surat altauba*, 71.)

Do we therefore propose new interpretations to render any text that seemingly harbours discrimination more logically compatible with the lofty principles and bases of the Islamic message? To do that, do we link the verses to one another (on the premise that the Qur'an explains itself), or link the verses to the *hadiths* or to the 'practised' *sunna* and the Prophet's life, as a model? (Saying, for example, that the Prophet personally never raised a hand against a woman and criticized the intention to bring a co-wife to his daughter Fatima, in order to end or at least limit domestic violence and multiple marriages.) Is it fitting for us to quote some of the few logical and just opinions of the classical religious scholars as examples, from within the tradition, on which to build a new feminist jurisprudence? (For example, al-Tabari's interpretation of the sentence 'men have a degree above them' (*surat albaqarah*, 228), that it is not 'information', a fact or a legislative injunction, but rather a recommendation, urging men to try hard to be better and do their best to fulfil their responsibilities towards women, magnanimously ignoring their own rights.)<sup>16</sup> Do we limit ourselves to reforming and correcting various opinions in existing interpretations, selectively choosing some of them and discarding others, or do we disregard them all? What would be our frame of reference then? What would be the theoretical and methodological framework of this process of interpretation and rereading? Should Muslim feminist researchers agree on specific mechanisms and strategies to come up with a set of consistent and well-coordinated interpretations?

All these subtle methodological and epistemological issues and problems are still the subjects of research and study, and have led to a large body of religious knowledge and independent interpretations and analyses (mostly in English). And though we may or may not agree on them, or though we may accept some and reject others, these remain an accumulation of scholarly and research material from a feminist perspective, reflecting the point of view of Muslim women researchers and based on their experiences. Though they accepted this particular religion as their point of reference, these researchers refuse to be excluded and discriminated against in the name of God Almighty. However, with very few exceptions, there is a lack of serious debate and studies written in Arabic on Islamic feminism at that level, and we still have not transcended the differences over terminology, or

the general rejection of efforts to join the Islamic and feminist perspectives in a single intellectual project.

It is also worth mentioning and monitoring certain activist campaigns and international movements launched by organizations that work on the ground on a larger global scale. Their objective is to network with Muslim women activists worldwide and cooperate in lobbying for particular issues, such as amending Muslim family laws (such as the Musawah Global Movement launched in February 2009 by the Sisters in Islam organization in Malaysia) and convincing the public of the need for women to play roles in religious leadership (e.g. the creation by the US-based American Society for Muslim Advancement of the Women's Islamic Initiative in Spirituality and Equality to establish a world council for women *muftis*, by the name of the Shura Council).

## **The situation in the Arab scene**

Despite the shortcomings in the intellectual and theoretical field, another form of development is unfolding on the Arab scene, namely the religious proselytizing by women preachers in mosques, a subject studied in detail several years ago by Saba Mahmood in her book *The Politics of Piety*,<sup>17</sup> and earlier on, by Azza Karam, in her pioneering study of women activists in Islamic political organizations.<sup>18</sup> In this chapter, I am particularly interested in the *fiqhi* and interpretative activities and *fatwas* (issuing legal opinions) by female Azharite scholars and experts in legal and Islamic *sharia* issues, and their contribution to any current religious debate that appears on the scene, especially when it concerns women's family and public life. I shall focus in particular on the situation in Egypt, and give as an example the recent notable appearances in the media of Dr Suad Saleh, Professor of Comparative Islamic Jurisprudence, Dr Amna Nusayr, Professor of Islamic Doctrine and Philosophy, and Dr Malaka Yousef Zirar, Professor of Law and Sharia. Although they do not operate within any feminist theory that we can recognize, what is clear in the development of their positions over the past ten years is the crystallization of an awareness of women's particular condition in society, cultural value systems, and in the religious discourse, based on their own life experiences and close contact with pressing legal problems and the practicalities of domestic life – in other words, a developing awareness of the discrimination and bias in the

discourse of male scholars and *muftis*. This has prompted some of them to address openly, in cultural gatherings, seminars and the media, this injustice and the need to separate it from religious rulings or, sometimes, to express through their discourse the palpable latent tension between the official Azhari line under which they trained and operated, and the realistic female point of view based on the perspective of Muslim women themselves on the subject. (Objections were raised to Dr Suad Saleh's presence in mosques to give lectures and take part in educational and cultural seminars, on the basis of allegations that she was assuming the role of *imam*. She herself has often expressed the feeling that her words, statements and *fatwas* were under constant and close scrutiny.)

There are pros and cons to the presence of these female religious scholars and *muftis*. The positive aspects are:

1. The idea has grown that there are women experts who can independently access religious sources and specialized knowledge without intermediaries – that is, women fully capable of being part of the official religious authority.
2. The notable presence of these women in the public domain promotes the readiness of society – a society used to receiving its religious knowledge exclusively from male scholars – to accept religious legal knowledge from female experts, as well as enhances confidence in their skills and abilities.
3. There has developed over time a women's point of view emanating from their own practical experiences of specific legal issues, hence encouraging more just and equitable religious rulings.

The negative aspects are:

1. Despite the skill that Azharite women scholars and legal experts possess in their respective academic fields, they have not produced sufficient theoretical or scholarly studies that have had an impact on the ongoing debates surrounding female/feminist religious scholarship or the interpretation of the gender-related issues discussed above. The very few exceptions lack, on the whole, a real awareness of gender issues.<sup>19</sup>

2. These women face difficulties in their attempt to establish their independence, due to the pressures brought to bear on them by the official religious establishment to which they belong, and that imposes on them certain red lines, or forces them to retreat and compromise.
3. Instead of solidarity and complementarity, there is a gap between the public and media activities of these women religious scholars, on the one hand, and Islamic feminist theoreticians, on the other.

## Conclusion

The field of Islamic feminist research is therefore rife with dualities: the international context and the Arab context; the intellectual and theoretical dimension as opposed to activism and media activities; literal interpretations as opposed to value-based interpretations – that is, interpretations based on the ‘moral intent’ and ultimate objectives of the *sharia*, which Khaled Abou El Fadl calls moral analysis or *maqasid* inquiry; the text itself vs. post-text or what lies outside it; and a divisive or selective methodology as opposed to a holistic and comprehensive one. Finally, there is the problematic of knowledge and authority. The question arises: Are those who produce alternative knowledge capable of imposing it and impacting through it the prevailing situation or mainstream if they lack the requisite means of power and authority within their respective contexts? In this case, does knowledge necessarily lead to power, or should we be empowered first before we can activate the knowledge we have acquired, and use it to change the status quo?

## Notes

\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Cairo University; Women and Memory.

1. Haleh Afshar used the term ‘feminist fundamentalism’ to describe feminist activism within the processes of the state’s official ideology in ‘Islam and feminism: an analysis of political strategies’, in May Yamani (ed.) (1996), *Feminism and Islam* (Berkshire: Ithaca Press); Parvin Paidar (1996), ‘Feminism and Islam in Iran’, in Deniz Kandiyoti (ed.), *Gendering the Middle East* (London: I.B.Tauris); and Afsaneh Najmabadi (1998), ‘Feminism in an Islamic republic’, in Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad and John Esposito (eds), *Islam, Gender, and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

2. Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2006), ‘Muslim women’s quest for equality between Islamic law and feminism’, *Critical Inquiry*, 32, pp. 629–45.

3. Omaima Abou-Bakr (2002), '*alniswiyah, qadaya aljindar walru'yah alislamiyah*' (Feminism, issues of gender and the Islamic view), in *almar'a walgender: ilgha' altamyeez althaqafi walijtima'i bayn aljinsayn* (Eliminating Cultural and Social Discrimination between the Sexes) (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr); Omaima Abou-Bakr (2002), '*da'una natakalham*' (Let us talk) in *The Windows of Faith*, edited by Gisela Webb, translated by Ibrahim Yahya al-Shihabi (Damascus: Dar al-Fikr); Omaima Abou-Bakr (1999), 'Gender perspectives in the Islamic tradition', talk given at the Second Annual Minaret of Freedom Institute Dinner, Gaithersburg, Maryland, 26 June, available at [www.minaret.org/gender.htm](http://www.minaret.org/gender.htm), accessed 20 November 2013; Omaima Abou-Bakr (2001), 'Islamic feminism: what's in a name? Preliminary reflections', *AMEWS Review*, xv–xvi (Winter/Spring), pp. 1–4; Mai Yamani (1996), 'Introduction' to *Feminism and Islam* (London: Ithaca Press). Karin Ask and Marit Tjomsland (eds) (1998), *Women and Islamization* (New York, NY: Berg); Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2003), 'The construction of gender in Islamic legal thought and strategies for reform', *hawwa* 1(1), pp. 1–28; Margot Badran (2009), *Feminism in Islam* (Oxford: One World).
4. Omaima abou-Bakr (2006), '*alniswiyah alislamiyah bayna ishkaliyat aldakhil walkhaiej*' (Islamic feminism between internal and external problems), *tibah*, 7.
5. See Amina Wadud (1999), *Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press); Riffat Hassan (1991), 'Muslim women and post-patriarchal Islam', in Paula Cooney (ed.), *After Patriarchy: Feminist Transformations of the World Religions* (New York, NY: Orbis Books). Azizah al-Hibri (2000–1), 'Muslim women's rights in the global village and opportunities', *Journal of Law and Religion*, 15(1/2), pp. 37–66.
6. Asma Barlas (2002), *Believing Women in Islam* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press).
7. Kecia Ali (2006), *Sexual Ethics and Islam* (Oxford: One World); see also Amira Sonbol (2001), 'Re-thinking women and Islam', in Yvonne Haddad and John Esposito (eds), *Daughters of Abraham* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida).
8. See Yoginder Sikand's interview with Ziba Mir-Hosseini (2010), 'Understanding Islamic feminism', 7 February, available at [www.countercurrents.org/sikand070210.htm](http://www.countercurrents.org/sikand070210.htm), accessed 30 July 2013.
9. Omaima Abou-Bakr (2011), '*qira'ah fialtafasir alqur'aniyah – wa'iyah bialnaw'*' (A gender-sensitive reading of Quranic exegesis), in *alniswiyah waldirasat aldiniyah* (Feminism and Religious Studies) (Cairo: Women and Memory Forum); Mohamed Mahmoud (2006), 'To beat or not to beat: on the exegetical dilemmas over Qur'an, 4: 34', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 126(4), pp. 537–50; Nawal Ammar (2007), 'Wife battery in Islam: a comprehensive understanding of interpretations', *Violence against Women*, 13(5), pp. 516–26; Karen Bauer (2009), 'The male is not like the female (3:36): the question of gender egalitarianism in the Qur'an', *Religion Compass*, 3/4, pp. 637–54.
10. Amina Wadud (2006), *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reforms in Islam* (Braintree, MA: One World).
11. Ibid., p. 192.
12. Ibid., p. 55.
13. Ibid., p. 134.
14. Ibid., p. 150.
15. Khaled Abou El Fadl (2006), *A Conference of the Books: The Search for Beauty in Islam* (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers).
16. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (1999), *jami' albayan 'an ta'wil ay alqur'an* (A Comprehensive Catalogue Interpretation of the Koran's Ayas), Vol. 2 (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr).
17. Saba Mahmood (2005), *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
18. Azza Karam (1998), *Women, Islamists, and the State* (London: Macmillan Press). See also Sherine Hafez (2001), 'The terms of empowerment', *Cairo Papers in Social Science*, 24(4) (Winter).
19. Amnah Nusayr (2001), *almar'a almuslimah bayna 'adl altashri' wa waqi' altatbiq* (Muslim Women between Just Legislation and Actual Implementation) (Cairo: Dar al-Kitab al-Hadeeth). Suad

Saleh (2008), *qadaya almar'a almu'asirah: ru'yah shar'iyah wa nazrah waqi'iyah* (Contemporary Women's Issues: A Legal Religious Vision and A Realistic View) (Cairo: Madbouli).



## CHAPTER 31

### Post-structuralist Theory and Women in the Middle East: Going in Circles?

*Marnia Lazreg\**

This article examines the effects of the uncritical use of the post-structuralist Foucauldian theoretical approach on studies of Middle Eastern women and gender. Focusing on the twin concepts of ‘empowerment’ and ‘resistance’ as they have been applied to account for the re-veiling trend among Muslim countries and communities, it explores the epistemic transformation of the explanation of this trend into its justification. It further provides an example of a historicized application of Michel Foucault’s conception of power.

#### **Background: knowledge and the Middle East**

This chapter explores the consequences, intended or unintended, of the application of the post-structuralist – especially Foucauldian – thought to the study of women in the Middle East, particularly with respect to the re-veiling trend. It intends to explain the transformation of the old discourse of Muslim women’s ‘oppression’ into a discourse of apology resting on a subversion of the twin concepts of ‘resistance’ and ‘empowerment’. It should be made clear from the outset that Michel Foucault’s theoretical and epistemological work is far more complex and fruitful than the selective use of some of his concepts currently applied to Middle Eastern institutions and practices.

The study of Middle Eastern societies was traditionally confined to area studies, a domain that was generally immune to methodological and theoretical developments that took place in mainstream social science. It

was the preserve of experts whose objectives were to translate the specificity of the Middle East to their countries of origin. Their method of research was thus stable in so far as it was held to be largely unquestionable. The disciplines from which these experts originated, namely language, archaeology, history and anthropology, were also relatively less open to challenge than others such as sociology, political science or political economy. Referred to as 'orientalists', these experts created a body of knowledge that had its own boundaries, and that succeeded in functioning autonomously. The normalization of the knowledge they produced set the tone for native researchers writing in the European languages.

Two factors, operating in different directions, propelled the study of Middle Eastern societies outside of its intellectual ghetto: the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*<sup>1</sup> and the institutionalization of women's studies programmes. Academic feminism signified the search for a new mode of theorizing that would account for 'women's experience'.<sup>2</sup> The universalistic claims of feminist theories of gender needed to be validated through the study of women in non-Western societies, especially Middle Eastern Muslim women whose religion presented feminists with a challenge. Said provided a concept, Orientalism and a critique couched in anti-imperial terms that could not be ignored, and that helped to articulate, for a younger generation of scholars who had felt uneasy with the knowledge yielded by area studies, its assumptions and socio-political implications. In becoming sensitized to signs or traces of orientalist assumptions or epistemology, students of the Middle East began to look for alternative theoretical approaches and systems just as they wrote to denounce Orientalism as expressing relations of power and domination. By the same token, awareness of the pitfalls of Orientalist epistemology spurred younger scholars to explore prevalent theoretical systems such as critical theory as formulated by Jürgen Habermas,<sup>3</sup> and post-structuralist thought as formulated by Foucault. Oddly, while this search was going on in established disciplines, academic feminism, in its first phase, seized upon women in the Middle East as the embodiment of two related shortcomings: lack of agency and unmediated 'oppression' understood to be embedded in the religion of Islam. The two trends went their separate ways for a while, until the end of the Cold War when a quickened pace of cultural exchange with the Middle East was ushered in, and native female researchers

emerged eager to explore concepts and theories such as those of post-structuralism that started to make inroads into feminist studies.

If deconstruction as exemplified by the work of Jacques Derrida held sway in literary criticism, Foucault's conception of power and sexuality helped to redefine feminist theory, especially in the United States. An intellectual climate has emerged that frequently dispenses with the identification of a post-structuralist theorist as a source of inspiration so that a scholar may use the theoretical language of Foucault – for example, without a preliminary discussion of its meanings or applicability. The post-structuralist conceptual spillover in the study of Middle Eastern societies has served as either a cover or a legitimation for mounting critiques of existing governments, or exploring past historical events as representing multiple struggles for speaking to power. With respect to the study of women in the Middle East, the gradual introduction of a post-structuralist conception of power was adopted with little discussion of the theory or epistemology that ground it. It is thus important to examine what Foucault wrote about history and power before finding out whether there has been a break with previous conceptions of women.

## **Foucault on history, structure and the subject**

Foucault's conception of power is unintelligible if it is not understood in its context, namely Foucault's perspective on history, discursive formations and the role of the Subject in relation to knowledge. What is noteworthy about Foucault's theoretical system is its non-reducibility to an anthropological or sociological interpretation of issues that are treated independently of the thick history in which they are embedded. In the *Order of Things*,<sup>4</sup> Foucault proposes to study the manner in which a given culture shapes language use, concepts, perceptions and social practices that coalesce to create 'order'. This is the order that is found in classifications of nature, conceptions of human beings belonging to different cultures as well as the very understanding of knowledge. Historical and scientific knowledge does no more than provide *justifications* for the production of this order; they do not trace the conditions of its production. In the same book, Foucault argues that beginning in the eighteenth century, Man became an object of knowledge and what constituted it like any other object. This 'discovery' of Man as an object of study also meant his

undoing since he has now become an object to be classified (the sane and the mad, the criminal and the law-abiding), scrutinized in medical terms (the pathological and the normal), confined (the dangerous) and excluded or repressed (the gay and the straight). The more knowledge of Man is sought and accumulated, the more he shrinks as an autonomous being, and the less he can escape from the conceptual schemes that entrap him like an intricate web.

Parallel to this, Foucault further argues that difference, otherness, is *produced* in a process that is not initiated by one person, since it is culturally embedded. However, some individuals did articulate key changes at significant moments in the history of knowledge. For example, René Descartes initiated a different way of thinking about truth and certainty by grounding these in the dismissal (exclusion) of factors that might undermine them. The Cartesian doubt was founded on the non-exploration of the relationship between reason and unreason, sanity and madness. Descartes subjected his radical doubt to the tests of sleep or dreams arguing that he could be just sleeping and dreaming that he was doubting, but concluded that he was not, as the evidence of his senses proved otherwise. However, he denied that his doubt could be caused by madness. Had he been mad, he would not have been able to think his madness. A mad man has no capacity to reason, and for Descartes to think of himself as a madman would be madness in its own right. Consequently, while sleep and dreams can be a source of error, they still retain a residue of truth. They are more accessible to the experience of the doubting subject than madness is. Foucault's critique of the Cartesian doubt is momentous as it focuses on the role of otherness in theorizing. By excluding madness as a non-experiential condition that could not undermine the certainty of his doubt, Descartes elided the possibility of difference – *qua* – otherness in establishing certainty and truth. Indeed, he could have questioned the conventional understanding of madness and wondered whether positing the assertion 'I think therefore I am' was not an arbitrary act that would have easily been replaced with 'I think therefore I am not who I think I am'. Descartes asserted the wholeness of his subjectivity at the expense of that of the mad other. Consequently, he produced an unmediated other whose subjectivity is dissolved because it cannot be penetrated.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the Subject was foundational of the kind of knowledge in the social sciences that also dissolves the subjectivity of others. Foucault's critique of the flaw in the

establishment of rationalist philosophy has relevance for the study of women in so far as it provides an epistemological critique of the neglect or exclusion of the role of women in social science theorizing prior to the advent of academic feminism. It also sheds light on Foucault's conception of power and empowerment.

Foucault intended to outline a method of studying power that would not focus on government institutions as its source and cause, but shift attention instead to the multiple ways in which power is enacted, felt and responded to by people who have been constructed as others (such as the mad, prisoners, the hermaphrodite, etc.). However, this does not mean that any action that is undertaken by an individual is necessarily a source of power (or empowerment), or that it represents resistance. If some of Foucault's texts may invite such a simplification, it is clear from his study of madness and other 'limit experiences' that the Subject is frequently constituted by power relations embedded in the language in which experience is framed. Furthermore, where Foucault clarifies his methodology, which he terms 'historico-critical', he points out three essential factors:

- awareness of the 'contemporary limits of the necessary';
- 'permanent critique of ourselves'; and
- 'forms of rationality' that organize individuals as well as the 'freedom' with which they act.<sup>6</sup>

These principles call for a constant critical stance before what appears inevitable or compelling. The last one clearly indicates that Foucault was aware that the 'freedom' with which individuals act may be a structuring form of rationality. He did not and could not imply that such 'freedom' was absolutely free, or that it was acceptable. Although Foucault objected to a number of characteristics of the Enlightenment world-view, he also retained, albeit begrudgingly and selectively, its emancipatory impulse. He borrowed Immanuel Kant's definition of the Enlightenment as ushering in the passage from a state of 'immaturity' to one of 'adulthood'.<sup>7</sup> He called for 'a historical investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are doing...'.<sup>8</sup> The state of maturity Kant had defined as the hallmark of modernity when combined with Foucault's emphasis on understanding the constitution of our subject-hood necessarily implies a next step, that of involvement in

some concrete action to bring about change for ourselves. Although he consistently refrained from providing specific guidelines for change for others to follow, Foucault engaged in selective acts of protest as a 'specific intellectual'. It must be recalled that by being selective about which cause to support, Foucault wished to distinguish himself from Jean-Paul Sartre, who espoused all progressive movements' causes. For instance, Foucault participated in protests against the treatment of prisoners in French jails, or in solidarity with Poland's opposition to Communist rule. These and other specific acts do not naturally flow directly from his theorizing. Rather, they represent Foucault's embeddedness in a society in which expressing one's opinion about local and world events in accordance with some fundamental principles of humanness is a value. In this sense, Foucault's critique of humanism, which grounds his methodological approach, namely archaeology and genealogy, is at odds with his occasional political engagement, itself a by-product of the Enlightenment. Foucault's analysis of the Iranian Revolution in 1978–9 is the best example of the paradox of rejecting humanism, on the one hand, and acting according to its values, on the other. An assessment of his analysis is beyond the scope of this article, but he left no doubt about the source of the power against which the Iranians protested. However, having hailed the revolution as a singular event aimed at bringing about a new order drawing its force and inspiration from religion – Shi'ism – Foucault ultimately resorted to an interpretation in historical materialist terms after he realized that events in the aftermath of Khomeini's ascent to power took a turn he had not anticipated.<sup>9</sup>

It must be remembered that Foucault was writing about Western historical formations with a view to questioning their traditional self-representation as being impelled by a progressive movement forward. He focused on discontinuities rather than on continuities, contingent events and 'limit experiences'. Therefore, the application of some of his concepts, shorn of the epistemological context in which they are embedded, to explain past or current events in the Middle East may result in an outcome that is the opposite of the theoretical import of Foucault's thought. The point is not that Foucault's theories should not be used when studying Middle Eastern societies. Nor is this an argument in favour of a theoretical ghettoization of studies of Middle Eastern societies. Rather, this is an invitation to reflect on the transformation of theoretical interpretation into justification. It is an exploration of the process by which the study of issues

that are central to Middle Eastern Muslim women's history and roles in society turns into a study of the glorification of the contingent and the maintenance of the status quo. Put differently, this is a reflection on the process by which social science (as represented by ascendant academic feminist practices) relinquishes its demystifying function to become an apologetic discourse for reasons external to the subject under investigation. The study of the re-veiling movement that has swept across Muslim societies in the past two decades is a case in point.

### **Knowing or justifying (re-)veiling?**

To reiterate, at the beginning of second-wave feminism in the United States, the discourse on the veil privileged 'oppression' as an explanation of Muslim women's condition. Islam was perceived as unchanging and unchangeable. Women appeared as passive bearers of religious categories, having no will of their own. The veil was interpreted as a tangible symbol of 'oppression' as well as an integral part of women's persona. When an occasional 'Muslim' woman objected to her representation in the feminist discourse, she was dismissed as a mouthpiece for men's patriarchal ideology. Parenthetically, this interpretation of women and their relation to Islam constituted a feminization of the then-prevailing (and male-centred) academic discourse on Middle Eastern societies.<sup>10</sup> In what became a second phase, starting around the 1990s, researchers began to reverse this trend and three main approaches emerged. One is a class analysis that represents veiling as a tool that a poor or working-class woman uses to work outside the home without incurring the wrath of her husband, or to neutralize rumour-mongering in her community. Another approach adopts a narrative of the veil as signalling the failure of 'modernizing' policies undertaken by Middle Eastern states in the aftermath of the decolonization movements. From this perspective, women turn to the veil in protest. Presumably, protest is also a cause of women's donning the veil as a means of securing legitimacy when they wish to challenge interpretations of the *sharia*.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, putting on a veil is interpreted as an exercise in female agency either in the form of resistance or empowerment.<sup>12</sup> A third approach involves variations on the first two approaches and turns the veil into a mere *dress* that is culturally shaped, a sort of costume,<sup>13</sup> or (and primarily

among converts and women members of faith-based associations) a religious obligation for a woman, a sort of sixth pillar of Islam.<sup>14</sup>

It is noteworthy that the academic discourse on re-veiling reinforces, and to a large extent mirrors, the conception upheld by faith-based movements on this issue.<sup>15</sup> The twin concepts of ‘resistance’ and ‘empowerment’ grounded in a post-structuralist theoretical domain cannot in and of themselves explain the (re-)veiling trend. Generally, resistance to power and domination usually implies the search for a greater good, such as freedom, which requires finding and using tools (e.g. empowering oneself) with which to resist. Admittedly, under special circumstances individuals resist their subjugation through acts that undermine their domination by others. For example, a worker experiencing exploitation may manage surreptitiously to sabotage the machine on which he works, malingers on the job, etc. Resistance as an object of social science enquiry, however, is a highly complex question as it brings into play intricate relationships between the powerless and the powerful, as well as the socio-cultural, political and economic contexts within which these relationships take place.

Anthropologists have questioned the ease with which researchers have frequently turned conscious acts of behaviour aimed at taking a position, upholding a custom or value, or taking a step toward change, for example, as unmitigated acts of resistance.<sup>16</sup> The ambiguity of the concept of resistance is such that it lends itself to a romanticized view of observed behaviour when the ethnographer is eager to foreground her subjects’ purposive action, which subsequently appears sanitized of ‘politics’.<sup>17</sup> More importantly, the uncritical use of the concept of resistance dispenses with an examination of the minute and insidious ways in which power operates in relationships between women and men. In the study of re-veiling, the use of the twin concepts of ‘resistance– empowerment’ obscures the actual relationship between women and men; leaves unaddressed the nature and purpose of ‘empowerment’; and makes it impossible to determine the conditions under which acquiescing to veiling may be a form of cultural complicity.<sup>18</sup> These twin concepts are embedded in a form of cultural relativism that stresses the functionality of veiling by systematically excluding an examination of its dysfunctions, or at best explaining them away. For example, such studies summarily dismiss as ‘Westernized’ women who argue that re-veiling is a trend that re-inscribes women in an



old pattern of gender inequality and thus does not constitute a rupture with the past. This interpretative dismissal is indicative of two biases.

First, the researcher (when she is a non-Muslim) claims professional 'objectivity' by pointing out that the critic of the veil is but a pale copy of herself – a 'Westernized' rather than a genuinely 'Western' woman, not the real thing. Consequently, the veil, once reviled by early academic feminists as a marker of 'oppression', is rehabilitated at the expense of the native woman critic who is made to appear as biased ostensibly because of her social class affiliation which informs her presumed Westernization. In this the interpretative circle is closed: native women are set against one another, with the good Muslim woman who 'empowers' herself with the veil elevated to a state of cultural heroism, and the Muslim woman who questions the veil relegated to an inauthentic, prejudiced 'West' which she implicitly fails to resist.

Second, the researcher reveals a dogmatic a-historicism by implicitly claiming that veiling is a condition of being Muslim, that no woman should aspire to being different because that difference has already been claimed. In other words, freedom from the veil is a privilege that only some women can claim by being born in the 'West'. In this context, it is not surprising that justifications for re-veiling would be taken seriously as expressions of cultural difference. Veiling is normatively imbued with a number of unexamined functions, including the preservation of modesty, protection from sexual harassment and assertion of cultural identity, as well as female piety.<sup>19</sup>

What would a Foucauldian analysis of re-veiling be like? It would first of all identify the historical formation within which the veil emerged and became entrenched. It would delineate four periods: pre-colonial (writ large), colonial, post-independence and current. This would help to determine the rise and fall of the veil as an object of historical enquiry.

Second, it would delineate the language – religious, juridical, political and cultural – in which the veil has been enunciated in the various historical periods, as well as trace its variations from and continuities with the classical period of Islamic law. The veil as discourse is analytically distinct from the veil as history, yet it cannot be separated from it.

Third, it would trace the disturbances, modifications, corrections – material, social, political and juridical – that took place as a result of the enforced 'intimacy' effectuated by the imperial West. Of special interest is

the encounter with 'Western' feminism. In the current historical conjuncture, the *westing of the West* (the flipside of the *easting of the East* or orientalism) has resulted in presenting women in the Middle East as the 'redeemers' by proxy of women in Western countries for their perceived bodily sins. Wearing the veil, 'covering', is hailed as the antidote to the sexual objectification of women in the 'West', the recovery of a quintessential sexual morality – the famed 'modesty'. By the same token, young women are urged to cast doubt on the philosophy of women's liberation on the grounds that they are already free, and have all the rights that they could hope to get given their fundamental biological difference from men.<sup>20</sup> More important, the veil is upheld as a new form of 'modernity' for women.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, a woman's identity is objectified, reduced to the veil. There is circularity in the justification of the veil: Muslim women wear it; women who wish to identify themselves as Muslims should wear the veil; there is no alternative to being a Muslim woman in a veil.

The fourth element in a Foucauldian analysis of re-veiling would be to unearth the various methods through which the discourse of veiling constitutes women as subjects at different epochs, the conditions under which such methods become inoperative, and the configurations of events that enable them to be intensified. Parallel to this, this perspective would address the ways in which women's awareness of the discourse of the veil as a discourse of power played to their advantage as well as disadvantage. In the aftermath of decolonization struggles, a generation of women ceased to think of veiling as determining their Islamicity or womanhood. In the present historical conjuncture, these women's achievement is elided in favour of a view that flaunts a seamless history of the veil as a condition of female Islamicity.

Finally, the fifth and last element would be to bring out the dual nature of the veil discourse as also constitutive of men's masculinity. How does a change in the veiling discourse affect a man's identity? Under what socio-political and economic conjuncture do men (especially the younger among them) perceive the absence of a veil as producing sexual vulnerability for them? How do these men avail themselves of a greater range of expression of a softer (more feminine) identity made available globally (in the media), but insist on a more rigidly defined masculinity by demanding that a fiancée or a wife wear a veil?

In conclusion, this article has argued for a critical awareness of facile interpretations that reconcile women to practices and events that are limiting to them by normalizing the contingent as being necessary and inevitable. In Foucault's words:

The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.<sup>22</sup>

## Notes

\* Hunter College, CUNY, New York, NY, USA.

1. Edward Said (1978), *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Pantheon).
2. For an assessment of the role played by 'experience' in feminist epistemology, see Marnia Lazreg (1994), 'Feminist epistemology and women's experience: a critical neo-rationalist approach', in Margaret Whitford and K. Lennon (eds), *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy* (London: Routledge), pp. 45–62.
3. For an example of the use of Habermas' theory, see Marc Lynch (1999), *State Interests and Public Spheres: The International Politics of Jordan's Identity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press); for examples of the use of Foucault's theorizing, see Timothy Mitchell (1991), *Colonising Egypt* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); and Khaled Fahmy (2002), *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cairo and New York, NY: American University of Cairo Press). It must be noted that Fahmy uses Mitchell's adaptation of Foucault's political thought.
4. Michel Foucault (1970), *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York, NY: Pantheon).
5. Michel Foucault (1998), 'My body; this paper; this fire', in James Faubion (ed.), *Essential Works of Foucault, Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, Vol. 2 (New York, NY: The New Press), pp. 393–417.
6. Michel Foucault (1977), 'What is enlightenment?', in P. Rabinow (ed.), *The Essential Works of Foucault*, Vol. 1 (New York, NY: The New Press), pp. 305–9.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., p. 315.
9. For an analysis of Foucault's reports on the Iranian Revolution, see Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson (2005), *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seduction of Islamism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
10. The characteristics of the academic feminist discourse on women in the Middle East have been addressed by Marnia Lazreg (1988), 'Feminism and difference: the perils of writing as a woman on women in Algeria', *Feminist Studies*, 14(1), pp. 81–107, esp. pp. 81–9.
11. Although not an advocate of veiling, Amina Wadud explains that she wears a veil strategically such as when she speaks to a male audience about religious matters; Amina Wadud (2006), *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reforms in Islam* (Braintree, MA: One World), p. 223, also pp. 177, 221. Veiling goes unquestionably hand in hand with the Cairo 'piety movement' as studied by Saba Mahmood (2004), *The Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).

12. Among others, see for example Leila Hessini (1994), 'Wearing the hijab in contemporary Morocco: choice and identity', in Fatma Müge Göçek and Shiva Balaghi (eds), *Reconstructing Gender in the Middle East: Tradition, Identity and Power* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), pp. 40–56; Arlene Elowe MacLeod (1991), *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veil and Change in Cairo* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press); Sherifa Zuhur (1992), *Revealing Reveiling: Islamist Ideology in Contemporary Egypt* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press).
13. Fadwa El Guindi (1999), *Veil: Modesty, Privacy and Resistance* (Oxford: Berg).
14. Katherine Bullock (2003), *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought).
15. Lazreg, 'Feminism and difference', pp. 81–107.
16. For an excellent statement of the pitfalls of reifying 'resistance', see Sherry Ortner (1995), 'Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 37(1), pp. 173–93.
17. Ortner, 'Resistance and the problem of ethnographic refusal', pp. 176–7.
18. In this regard, the re-veiling discourse signals a regressive step in relation to what Ortner (ibid.) called the 'refusal of ethnography' to identify the failings of the ethnography of 'resistance'.
19. For a discussion of these justifications, see Marnia Lazreg (2009), *Questioning the Veil: Open Letters to Muslim Women* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press).
20. For a discussion of this issue, see ibid., pp. 81–3.
21. Tariq Ramadan (2004), *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
22. Foucault, 'What is enlightenment?', p. 313.

## CHAPTER 32

### Two Faces of the Revival of Feminist Qur'anic Exegesis: 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman and Amina Wadud\*

*Husn Abboud\*\**

#### **Muslim women's entry into the realm of Qur'anic exegesis**

Throughout history Muslims have shown a keen interest in studying the Qur'an and writing commentaries on it. Given that Muslim commentators have tended to represent the ideological currents and socio-cultural trends of their times, Qur'anic exegesis became a mirror of Islam's intellectual history. However, since Muslim women did not take part in this field of Qur'anic sciences as they did in the study of the *hadith* and *fiqh* (jurisprudence), the effort remained an exclusively male domain.

Now that Muslim women are well equipped with knowledge of the sciences of the Qur'an (*'ulum alqur'an*), they are aware of the importance of understanding the text that underlies their rights and continues to formulate Muslim culture, for both men and women. This knowledge and awareness opened the door to women's entry into the realm of Qur'an exegesis.<sup>1</sup> Dr 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman, the Egyptian professor known as Bint al-Shati' (Daughter of the Shore), is considered the first Muslim woman in the Arab and Muslim worlds to embark on a systematic method for the study of the Qur'an.<sup>2</sup>

In the 1990s, a group of Arab and non-Arab Muslim women showed interest in the 'topical exegesis' (*altafsir almawdu'i*) of the Qur'an: by 'topical' they meant collecting all Qur'anic *ayas* (verses) on a given subject, and interpreting them according to the themes of the Qur'an. This

is what ‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman did in her book, *The Rhetorical Interpretation of the Qur’an* (1967), and the African-American Amina Wadud-Muhsin in *The Qur’an and Woman* (1992).<sup>3</sup>

## **Topical exegesis and two generations of women exegetes**

In this study I will present the topical exegesis methodology of ‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman and Amina Wadud-Muhsin. In comparing two generations of professors from different cultural backgrounds and educational environments, I hope to show, on the one hand, how the first generation of Arab women exegetes followed a philological-rhetorical methodology to interpret the Qur’an and to understand the Islamic perspective of women’s liberation. The second generation of non-Arab Muslim exegetes, on the other hand, focused on a knowledge-based reading of cultural interpretation and the ‘concept’ of woman in the Holy Qur’an. I also hope to underline the innovative methodological contribution to Qur’anic exegesis, a pioneering feminist critique of a long history of interpretation during which men were not only the yardstick but also the sole interpreters of meanings and theories.

‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman (who died in 1998) was a pioneer scholar of the Qur’an, in the reintroduction of Arab women’s history and in writing about ‘the Islamic concept of women’s liberation’. Amina Wadud (born in 1952) distinguished herself in the interpretation of texts relevant to the ‘concept of woman’ in the Qur’an. She created a major controversy when on 18 March 2005,<sup>4</sup> in a New York Anglican church, and again, in October 2008, in Oxford, she took on the role of *imam* and led men and women in Friday prayers.

‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman was only the second woman to obtain a PhD from Cairo University (1950). She wrote her thesis on the poet Abu al-Ala’ al-Ma’ary, under the supervision of Professor Taha Hussein, and chose to write under the penname Bint al-Shati’. She became a professor of Arabic language and literature in ‘Ain Shams University, in Cairo, and a visiting professor at the Islamic University in Omdurman in Sudan. From 1970 until her death in 1998, she devoted her time to Qur’anic studies at Morocco’s al-Qarawiyyin University. About her teaching in Morocco she writes: the study of *i’jaz albayani* or ‘the rhetorical miracle of the Qur’an’ began its

place in Qur'anic sciences at *dar alhadith alhusseiniya* in Rabat, while literary exegesis was the topic of my lectures at the Sharia College in Fez.<sup>5</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s, she lectured in many cities including Algiers, New Delhi, Baghdad, Kuwait, Jerusalem, Rabat, Fez and Khartoum, and contributed books on the Qur'an, including: *filtalbayani* (Rhetorical Exegesis of the Qur'an), *altafsir wali'jaz* (Exegesis and the Rhetorical Miracle of the Qur'an), *alinsan waqadaya al'asr* (Human Being and Contemporary Issues), *alshakhsiya alislamiya* (The Islamic Personality) and *alQur'an waltafsir al'asri* (The Qur'an and Modern Exegesis).

Though the term 'feminism' had not come into current among pioneers in the Egyptian feminist movement when she was writing, 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman can be considered a feminist par excellence.<sup>6</sup> She was one of the pioneers of what she herself called *hara'er misr* (The Free Women of Egypt), a reference to the leading female personalities of the Egyptian women's renaissance. She wrote on issues related to peasant women, Arab female poets, the ladies of the Prophet's household (his mother, wives and daughters).<sup>7</sup> In a pioneering lecture entitled '*almafhum alislami li-tahrir almar'a*' – The Islamic Concept of Women's Liberation – she addressed the foundational Qur'anic discourse on women's rights and liberation.<sup>8</sup>

## **The philological-rhetorical method of the rhetorical exegesis of the Holy Qur'an**

In the introduction to the fifth edition of *altafsir albayani l'il qur'an alkarim* (The Rhetorical Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an),<sup>9</sup> 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman mentions the method she adopted from the book of her professor, Sheikh Amin al-Khuly, *manahij tajdid fi alnahu wabalagha waladab* (Innovative Methods in Grammar, Rhetoric and Literature).<sup>10</sup> As she described it, the core of the method involves:<sup>11</sup>

- basing the study of the Qur'an on the topical approach involves collecting *ayas* and *suras* on one topic from the *muhkam* book;
- understanding the text: the *ayas* are arranged in chronological order of revelation to understand circumstances of time and place. Providing a brief account of *asbab alnuzul* (the occasions of revelation) and upholding the famous principle of the Muslim jurists that the decisive

factor in determining the meaning of the verse is the universality of its wording and not its specific cause, '*alibra bi 'umum allafz la bi khusus alsabab*'. Disagreements around the reasons for certain revelations are usually because each individual, having witnessed an *aya* or *sura*'s revelation, links it to what he understood or saw as the reason for its having been revealed;

- understanding the signs of the expressions: because Arabic is the language of the Qur'an, we sense the genuine linguistic signification that gives a certain Arabic texture to the text, in both its concrete and figurative usages. We arrive at the true Qur'anic meaning by deducing all the linguistic formulas inherent in the text, and their specific contexts in the respective *ayas* and *suras*, as well as the general context of the Qur'an as a whole; and
- understanding the nuances of the language, we refer to the judgement of the context of the text, committing ourselves entirely to both the text and its spirit. We bring before it the opinions of interpreters, accepting those that conform to the meaning of the text, and avoiding those interpretations, which entered from Jewish and Christian exegetical traditions (from the Israelite genre), of the blemishes of sectarian frivolity, and other heretical interpretations.

As an example of Abd al-Rahman's exegetical methodology, here is her interpretation of the *aya*: 'By [the mystery of] the creation of male and female' from *surat allayl* (92:3), which begins with the oath: 'By the Night as it conceals [the light]; By the Day as it appears in glory; By [the mystery of] the creation of male and female; Verily, [the ends] ye strive for are diverse'; until the end of the *sura*'s 21 *ayas*.

'A'isha Abd al-Rahman begins by:

- Differentiating between the *suras* revealed in Mecca and Madina respectively, and giving her famous opinion on the order of the revelations, the consensus as to why certain *suras* were revealed, or the reason for differences in opinion among interpreters as to why they were revealed at all. She bases herself on the premise rule, '*alibra bi 'umum allafz la bi khusus alsabab*', and her opinion in this context is clearly the *sura*'s message to the general public, 'Verily, [the ends] ye strive for are diverse'.<sup>12</sup>



- Discussing rhetoric and highlighting the letter *waw* (and) ‘*walayli idha yaghsha...*’ to denote a clearly tangible and conscious opposition between the night’s conceal of its darkness and the day’s reveal of its light. As clear is the difference between the creation of male and female, ‘By [the mystery of] the creation of male and female’, taking into account the stylistic phenomenon through which the Qur’anic rhetoric purposefully clarifies the moral through different degrees of material light and darkness, in the span of a single day.<sup>13</sup> She then addresses the interpreters’ speculations about the letter *ma* (Arabic: ‘what’) actually meaning ‘*man*’ (Arabic: ‘who’), according to which the oath would read ‘He Who created male and female’, or considering the ‘*ma khalaqa*’ as the verbal noun, or the imagined verbal noun, whereby the meaning becomes ‘And created male and female’.

She then attends to the differences among interpreters as to the intended meaning of *male and female*, and the link between these oppositions, before giving her own definitive opinion:

We focus our attention on deducing the opposition and divergence dominating the entire *sura*. We start by looking at that which is perceptible in the divergence between the concealment of the night and the revealing of the day, and in the creation of male and female. It is a clarifying prelude to a similar divergence in people’s efforts: between he who gives, fears God and believes in kindness and he who withholds, considers himself free of need and denies kindness. It also clarifies the divergence between reward and punishment in the Afterlife: between the wretched one who will be consumed in a blazing fire, and the righteous one who will be removed far from it, only seeking the countenance of his Lord, Most High; and he is going to attain satisfaction.<sup>14</sup>

What interests us here is this philological-rhetorical interpretation which ‘A’isha Abd al-Rahman adapted to the method of her professor, Amin al-Khuly, especially since her interpretations were limited to the short Meccan *suras* that have nothing to do with the legislative ones revealed in Madina – in other words, the *ayas* which were misunderstood and consequently led to discrimination against women, and about which Leila Ahmed said that these misinterpretations became the standard reading adopted as a rule in Islam.<sup>15</sup> For feminist Muslim women, the situation is quite different today, since many feminists reinterpret the *ayas* whose original interpretation and terminology have been problematic, whether in terms of language, concept or legislation. Among others, the efforts of ‘Azizah al-Hibri,<sup>16</sup> Fatima Mernissi<sup>17</sup> and Asma Barlas<sup>18</sup> to reinterpret the ‘*qawwamah*’ *aya* (men are

legally responsible for women), its key word '*faddala*' (preferred) (4:34), as in '*bi ma faddala Allahu ba'dumhom 'ala ba'd*' (God has preferred some over others in bounty); the *mutallaqat*' aya (divorced women), and its key word '*daraja*' (degree) (2:228), as in '*wa lilrijali 'alayhunnadaraja*' (But the men have a degree over them) and the '*nushuz*' aya (4:34)<sup>19</sup> (the destruction of conjugal harmony), and its key word '*wa-drubuhunna*' (strike them), as in '*wa-drubuhunna fa in ata'nakom fa-la tabghu alayhinna sabilan*' (... strike them. But if they obey you, seek no means against them). These and other terms have been the object of controversy not only for their demoralizing meaning and the fallout from their interpretation on women's dignity, humanity, and social and political freedom, but also to formulate a new language and a culture that promotes affection and mercy between men and women.

'A'isha Abd al-Rahman died in 1998, having interpreted 14 Meccan *suras* related to universal issues, such as the example above on the creation of male and female – that is, *suras* that have nothing to do with women's rights, responsibilities or relationship with men, the family and society. This is despite the fact that the Qur'an, unlike the Bible, comprises *suras* that directly address women's issues, and which carry such titles as '*surat alnisa*' (The Women), '*surat al-talaq*' (Divorce) and '*surat almujaadilah*' (The Woman who Disputed with You, Mohammed). It indicates that Islam's holy book is not reluctant to discuss the personal issues of women, so all the more reason for books of rhetorical exegesis to tackle freely this subject as it is addressed in the Qur'an.

## **What is 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman's feminism?**

We find it in her article 'The Islamic conception of women's liberation', which is based on a lecture she delivered in 1967 at Omdurman University, in Sudan. In it, we notice that when 'A'isha uses an interpretive method to reading the Qur'anic text, she expresses feminist critiques and liberation-oriented views, which she applies 'as basic principles and reference points for everything else':

- She confirms that women's human rights are essential and authentic and rooted in Islam's holy book, a book that gives no indication whatsoever that Eve was created from Adam's rib, but confirms that

we all come from the same soul (*surat alnisa*’, 1): ‘From the Islamic perspective, a woman’s freedom lies in the integrity of her humanity, and all that this humanity includes in terms of rights, costs and consequences.’

- She links a woman’s legitimate right to education to her progress towards becoming a new woman.
- She stresses the liberated woman’s personal responsibility for her virtue, because the new and free Arab woman believes that she alone is mistress of her virtue. If this woman is asking for her rights, it is only to correct this flagrant mistake in past usage, make society understand that she alone bears the responsibility for protecting her virtue, and that the dignity of her femininity is part of her, rather than something that can be imposed, with a guard at the cage’s door or a chastity belt. This hitherto unseen insistence by women on bearing the consequences of their freedom, and the integrity of their virtue, emanates from the very core of Islam’s perspective on women’s liberation, based on the legal competence of women to shoulder this responsibility.
- She underlines the biological differences between males and females as opposed to the social differences between men and women; in other words, she distinguishes between the essential and the socio-cultural, in an early awareness of ‘gender’ as an analytical criterion. For ‘A’isha, equality means equal rights and responsibilities because, in her opinion, equality ‘remains strictly subject to instinct and to the natural law that knows no absolute equality, whether between man and man or woman and woman, let alone between one gender and the other’.
- She links equality between male and female, or lack thereof, to the moral standards at the core of the Qur’an’s interests, in its capacity as a ‘Guide Book’. In this context she says: the Holy Qur’an never said that man and woman are not equal, but that ‘Not equal are the evil and the good’, those ‘who know and those who do not know’, the ‘blind and the seeing’, ‘darkness and light’. These are just a few of the appositions the Qur’an uses to depict, in its own way, the tangible, in order to highlight the moral (intangible). Finally, ‘A’isha underlines the fact that equality, or lack thereof, has nothing to do with masculinity and femininity.

- She asks the woman with sound instincts that she should recognize man's legitimate and natural right to *qawwamah*, on condition that it is high time for him to know that this *qawwamah* is not an absolute right for men to exercise over women, but is restricted to 'what God has given one over the other and what they spend from their wealth'. Therefore, if a man disregards this restriction, he loses his right to *qawwamah*.

## Amina Wadud

Amina Wadud was born in 1952 in Bethesda, Maryland, to a poor African-American family. Her father was a Methodist minister, frustrated with his situation, and her mother left the family home as a very young woman. It was therefore Wadud's search for her own self and soul that led her to Islam.<sup>20</sup> Wadud tells us: 'it was not easy to be black in the United States of America, so you can imagine how much worse it was also to be poor and female'.<sup>21</sup> It seems that she found in Islam, and especially in the Holy Qur'an, the answers she was looking for and she converted in 1972. Since then she has been trying to extract new meanings and definitions for Muslim women whose lives express not only their selves but also their femininity.

In 1988, Wadud earned her PhD in Islamic and Arab Studies from the University of Michigan, and began her professional career at the International Islamic University in Malaysia, where she was a student until 1992. There, she came in contact with the 'Sisters in Islam'<sup>22</sup> and, in 1992, published her book, *The Qur'an and Woman*, in English. After her return to the USA, Wadud worked as Assistant Professor at the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department of Virginia's Commonwealth University.<sup>23</sup> The Arabic language translation of her book *alQur'an walmar'a: I'adat qira'at alnas alQur'ani min manthur nisa'i* was published by the Madbouli Bookshop in Cairo (2006).

### *Method of reinterpreting<sup>24</sup> the concept of woman in the Qur'an*

Wadud's book, *The Qur'an and Woman*, is no less important than 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman's book, *altafsir albayani lil-Qur'an alkarim* (The

Rhetorical Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an), which involves religion, jurisprudence, language and philosophy, as well as linguistics, grammar and rhetoric.<sup>25</sup> The reason is her method of reinterpretation, or what she calls 'the hermeneutics of *tawhid* (the unicity of God)' that relies, in the words of Fahmi Jad'an (who studied the various discourses of Islamic feminism),<sup>26</sup> on the dynamic relationships between universals (general principles) and particulars, within the framework of the Qur'an's rules of moral guidance, taking into account the context in which the revelations were received. The method's general principle, 'the entire perspective' of the revelations (i.e. the holistic method), should be based on the principle of total equality between the sexes. This interpretation confirms, in the context of gender, the principle of total equality of men and women.<sup>27</sup>

In the book's introduction, Wadud states that her method is interpretive and adheres to the traditional 'interpretation of the Qur'an through the Qur'an', and that she expanded the scope of some of this method's rules to analyse each *aya*:

- within its own context;
- in the context of the discussions around similar subjects in the Qur'an;
- in light of the syntax and style of language used in other places in the Qur'an;
- in light of transcending the Qur'an's principles; and
- within the framework of the Qur'an's universal view.

Amina Wadud derived her method of interpretation from the Pakistani American thinker Fazlur Rahman (1919–88), who in turn learned the hermeneutical method from his Professor, Toshiko Izutsu, at McGill University, in Canada, the first person to apply it to the Holy Qur'an. This led him to the notion of the Mohammedan Self, or the Otherness and Duality in the concept of revelation, based on which Fazlur Rahman believes that given the way they were revealed at given times, dates and occasions, whether personal or public, sections of the Qur'an were expressed in a language that fit the occasion. The revealed message, however, was not confined to these specific times and occasions. The reader will no doubt need to understand the inherent meaning of different Qur'anic expressions in order to ascertain their right meanings that tell us the intent behind the rulings or principles of a given *aya*. When the circumstances

change, the faithful are required to apply the original intent practically to the new context. This is what is meant today by the 'Qur'anic spirit'.

Wadud used the method she learned from Professor Fazlur Rahman to study the concept of woman in the Qur'an. She read the *aya* of the creation story and relevant notions such as the spirit, spouse, the duality of creation and the story of paradise. She read about the women of the Qur'an and the roles they played, and believed that the fact that, with the exception of the Mother Mary (alsayyida Maryam), their names are omitted is a sign of respect for women in general. She, of course, places this opinion squarely within the context of seventh-century social perceptions.

Wadud also read about women's lot in the afterlife and divided it into several stages: death, resurrection, accountability and fate; and confined the issue of '*hour al'in*' (paradise women) to the cultural environment of Mecca's social milieu. She read the *ayas* that Muslim women have been trying to reinterpret away from the 'male-oriented bias' for over three decades, and addressed key words like 'degree' (*daraja*), 'preference' (*tafaddol*) and women's disobedience (*nushuz*), and rulings such as beating women, divorce, polygamy, women's testimony, inheritance, etc. – notions that have always been interpreted to reflect the superiority of men over women. She thus tried, as Samer Rashouani writes in his review of her book, to offer a more integral view of the individual's rights and responsibilities, regardless of gender, and to this end has relied on the principle of time and place assignation, or what we know today as 'putting the text in its proper historical context (*arkhanat alnas*)'.<sup>28</sup> I shall give an example of Amina's interpretation of the term 'degree' in the Qur'anic expression 'And men are a degree over them', in the 'Divorced Women *aya*' (2:228).

She interprets: the degree does not strictly have to be between men and women; an individual or a group could gain or be granted a degree over others, as well. The Qur'an clearly says that individuals could, for example, gain a degree if they 'emigrated and strove in the cause of Allah with their wealth and their lives' (9:20), or performed any good act (75:20, 132:6, 19:46).<sup>29</sup> However, distinguishing between individuals and groups based on their deeds raises problems associated to women's worth, both in society and as individuals, and despite the fact that the Qur'an distinguishes on the basis of deeds, it does not specify the value of each deed, but leaves it to individual societies to do that as they see fit.

Where does the problem lie then? It lies in the fact that ‘a higher value is placed on men’s deeds over women’s deeds, regardless of the haphazard nature of the division of labour’.<sup>30</sup>

As for the degree gained through a good deed, the Qur’an specifies two points that ought to influence society’s evaluation:

1. All actions based on piety deserve the highest value.
2. ‘For men is a share of what they have earned, and for women is a share of what they have earned.’

Deeds may differ, but the reward depends on the individual’s actions, which is why the division of labour between males and females in a given society is not important; each society divides labour between males and females in a manner that ensures a job well done. The Qur’an does not delineate a certain division of labour, or establish a harmonious system for every social setup that ignores natural differences in society. On the contrary; it recognizes the need for these differences, and hence it states: ‘and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another’ (49:13) – that is, every group and every member in it – whether male or female – receives their just reward based on his deeds (social inclusivity).

Wadud then addresses the *ayas* in which God grants the degrees, those that differentiate on the basis of knowledge: ‘Allah will raise those who have believed among you and those who were given knowledge, by degrees’ (58:11); or on economic and social grounds as in the *aya*: ‘We who have apportioned among them their livelihood in the life of this world and have raised some of them above others in degrees that they may make use of one another for service;’ ‘But the mercy of your Lord is better than the (wealth) which they amass’ (43:32). The degree is a test for the earth’s inhabitants: ‘It is He Who had made you (His) agents inheritors of the earth: He had raised you to ranks, some above others: that He may try you in the gifts He had given you’ (6:165).

She then turns to the *aya* concerning divorce in which the word ‘degree’ (*daraja*)<sup>31</sup> also appears, and men are granted a superior status to women. Wadud points out that in the Qur’an, men’s distinction lies in their right to divorce their wives unilaterally without adjudication or assistance from anyone. On the other hand, to obtain a divorce a woman needs the state’s intervention (i.e. a judge). She concludes, ‘the rights owed to women are

just like the rights they themselves owe (their own responsibilities), as in conformity with fairness (*ma'ruf*) is concerned'; and then explains the word '*ma'ruf*' that precedes the word '*daraja*' in the above *aya*. She says that it is based on the passive tense of the root verb '*ya'aref*' (to know), and that it essentially elucidates that which is already 'clear', 'known' or 'familiarily accepted', and has dimensions relative to justice, benefit and acceptance, as far as treatment is concerned.<sup>32</sup>

With this, we are now well acquainted with two aspects of the innovative Qur'anic interpretation in which both scholars, 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman and Amina Wadud, adopted a topical exegesis for interpreting the Holy Qur'an. 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman's (Bint al-Shati') approach is philological-rhetorical and aims at studying the Qur'an each *sura* at a time, starting with the short Meccan *suras* and relying on experts in grammar, language and classical interpretive literature. Amina Wadud's approach is reinterpetive, and relies on a cultural interpretation of the Qur'an, the 'hermeneutics of unicity of God', but her very few linguistic and interpretive literary references distances Amina Wadud's study from the science of textuality ('*ilm alnas*) and its tools of analysis.

This chapter has shown that the methods of interpretation used by both 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman and Amina Wadud are clearly innovative. In the case of 'A'isha's study, this is due to the importance of the philological-rhetorical study of the text, a necessary step to understanding it, and in the case of Amina's study, because delving into the realm of hermeneutics is, as Paul Ricoeur says, to take the long path towards understanding the text.

This is precisely why this chapter is entitled 'Two Faces of the Revival of Feminist Qur'anic Exegesis', and presents a view critical of those who fear for Arabic rhetoric from feminist interpretation, or fear for Islam from 'gender' studies.<sup>33</sup> Some might be confused by the contrast I draw between 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman, the pioneer scholar in Arab and Qur'anic studies, and Amina Wadud, who recently declared gender *jihad* and a break with traditions, thus shattering the stereotypical image of the Muslim woman in the American and global contexts. The way I see it, however, as I have said in many previous studies, the new can be revealed by the old, and vice versa.

## Notes



\* Translated from the Arabic.

\*\* Independent Researcher, *Bahithat*.

1. *Tafsir* (Qur'anic exegesis) is the science that helps us understand the Qur'an, uncover its provisions and dispel any ambiguity or controversy surrounding it. See al-Khalidi and Salah Abdul-Fattah (2001), *alatafsir almadawdo 'i bayn alnathariya waltatbiq* (Topical Exegesis between Theory and Practice), first edition (Jordan: Dar al-Nafa'as), p. 12.

2. See Issa Boulata (1974), 'Modern Qur'an exegesis: a study of Bint al-Shati's method', *The Muslim World*, 64, pp. 103–12.

3. Amina Wadud (1992), *The Qur'an and Woman* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar Bakti SDN BHD); see Amina Wadud (2006), *alQur'an walmar'a*, translated by Samia Adnan (Cairo: Madbouli Bookshop).

4. On the incident and its significance, see Jamal al-Banna (2008), *imamat almar'a* (The Woman as an Imam) (Damascus: Petra Publishing and Distribution and the Association of Arab Intellectuals).

5. See 'A'isha Abdul-Rahman, *alatafsir albayani lil-Qur'an alkarim* (The Rhetorical Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an), Introduction to the fifth edition, p. 1.

6. To understand the development of the term 'feminism' and what it meant in the early days of the Egyptian feminist movement that called for women's rights, see Hosn Abboud, '*alkhitabat almutabayina lil niswiya walislam, walkhawf min alizdiwajiya filma 'ayir*' (The different discourses of feminism and Islam and the fear from double standards); and '*alnisa' filkhitab alarabi almu 'aser*' (Women in contemporary Arab discourse), *Bahithat* (Journal of The Lebanese Association of Women Researchers), 9 (2003–4), p. 357.

7. Bint al-Shati' (n.d.), *tarajom sayedat bayt alnubuwa* (Biographies of the Ladies of the Prophet's Household) (Beirut: al-Rayyan Heritage House, D.T.).

8. See Abd al-Rahman's (2009), article translated into English as 'The Islamic conception of women's liberation', in Hosn Abboud (ed.), *al-Raida, Women and Scriptures in the Arab World* (IWSAW, Lebanese American University, Issue 125).

9. 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman (1977), *alatafsir albayani l'il Qur'an alkarim* (The Rhetorical Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an) (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'aref).

10. Amin al-Khuly (1961), *manahij tajdid fi alnahu walbalagha waladab* (Innovative Methods of Grammar, Rhetoric and Literature) (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'aref).

11. 'A'isha Abd al-Rahman (1990), *alatafsir albayani li-l Qur'an alkarim* (The Rhetorical Exegesis of the Holy Qur'an), seventh edition (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'aref), pp. 10–11.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.

15. Leila Ahmed (1992), *Women and Gender in Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), p. 94.

16. Azizah al-Hibri teaches Islamic Jurisprudence at the University of Richmond, Virginia, and focuses on improving civil status laws in Muslim countries; she interpreted the Qawwamah aya in her chapter 'An introduction to Muslim women's rights', in Gisela Webb (ed.) (2000), *Windows of Faith* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press).

17. Fatima Mernissi's contribution was in overseeing the publication of an interesting book on promoting texts in the Qur'an that strengthen women's human rights.

18. Asma Barlas (2002), *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press).

19. The word *nushuz* means here the breakup of marital harmony.

20. Amina Wadud (2000), 'Alternative Qur'anic interpretation and the status of women', in Gisela Webb (ed.), *Windows of Faith* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press), p. 3.

21. See also Asma Barlas (2004), 'Amina Wadud's hermeneutics of the Qur'an', in Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Innovative Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an* (London: Oxford University Press in

association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies), pp. 97–123.

22. Sisters in Islam (SIS) is a group of Muslim professional women committed to promoting the rights of women within the framework of Islam. Our efforts to promote the rights of Muslim women are based on principles of equality, justice and freedom enjoined in the Qur'an, as made evident during our study of the holy text. See [www.sistersinislam.org](http://www.sistersinislam.org).

23. See Amina Wadud's latest book (2006): *Inside Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld).

24. See Mona Talba (2004), '*alhermanocratia almustalah walmafhoum*' (Hermeneutics: terminology and concept), in *Awraq Falsafiya*, 10, pp. 124–60.

25. See Boulata, 'Modern Qur'an exegesis'.

26. See Amina Wadud (1999), *The Qur'an and Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 38.

27. Ibid.

28. See the review of Amina Wadud's book by Samer Rishwani, Professor of Sharia at Damascus University: '*altafsir althaqafi li-l Qur'an, wa naz'at tajawuz altajnis* (The cultural Interpretation of the Qur'an, the Tendency towards Transcending Gender), in *Biblioislam* ([www.biblioislam.net](http://www.biblioislam.net)), 21 November 2006.

29. Ibid., p. 113.

30. Ibid., p. 117.

31. 'Divorced women remain in waiting for three periods, and it is not lawful for them to conceal what Allah has created in their wombs if they believe in Allah and the Last Day. And their husbands have more right to take them back in this (period) if they want reconciliation. And due to the wives is similar to what is expected of them, according to what is reasonable. But the men have a degree over them. And Allah is exalted in Might and Wise.'

32. See Wadud, *The Qur'an and Woman*, p. 117.

33. See the opinions of Hassan al-Shafi'i (2004), '*harakat alta'wil alniswi li-l Qur'an wal din, wa khatarahu 'ala albayan alarabi wa turathuhu*' (The feminist reinterpretation movement of the Qur'an and religion and its threat to Arabic rhetoric and its traditions), *majallat aldirasat alQur'aniya*, published by Islamic Studies Centre at London University's School of Oriental and African Studies, 6(4). Mohammad Haitham al-Khayyat, '*islam walgender*' (Islam and gender), lecture delivered at the regional consultation on sex and health within the socio-cultural framework of the Middle East region, Cairo, 19–21 December 2004.

## CHAPTER 33

# Rokeya in the World: Feminism and Islam in Twentieth-century Bengal

*Elora Shehabuddin\**

Since falling to this degraded position, we have never been able to raise our heads against our state of servitude. The principal reason for this is perhaps that, whenever a sister has tried to lift her head, her head has been pulverized with the excuse of religion or the force of utterances from holy texts! Of course, this cannot be said with certainty, but this is what I conjecture. What we did not accept easily initially, we later came to accept with reverence as religious injunctions. Now the situation is such that as soon as we are born, we hear, 'Hah! You were born a slave, you will remain a slave!' Consequently, even our souls have become enslaved!...

In order to keep us in the dark, men have declared these religious texts to be God's commands... But you see, these religious texts are nothing but rules and regulations created by men. What you see in the rulings of the sages, perhaps you would see the very opposite in the words of women sages. But women do not have the qualifications to be sages and saints!...

Now we no longer need to tolerate, with lowered heads, man's unwarranted domination in the name of religion. And see, where the hold of religion is extremely strong, that is where women are most oppressed. Proof, *sati*... Where the hold of religion is weak, women enjoy almost the same high status as men... It must be said that ultimately 'religion' has strengthened the bonds of our enslavement; men are lording over women using the pretext of religion.<sup>1</sup>

These words are taken from a Bengali essay with the title 'Amader Abonoti', or 'Our downfall', originally published in 1904 in the periodical *Nabanoor* by Begum Rokeya Hossain.<sup>2</sup> In 1908, several of her essays were published together in a collection, but five paragraphs, including these sections, were expunged because of the furor they had already provoked. To be precise, with her criticism of 'religion' generally, she had offended not only her fellow Muslims but also members of the other communities among whom she lived in early twentieth-century India, then under British colonial rule.

Even though she was writing in a period of growing Muslim nationalist sentiment among some elite Muslim males that would culminate in the first Partition of Bengal in 1905, Rokeya Hossain had no interest in claiming the superiority of women's rights under Islam in such matters as inheritance, the right to contract, etc. For her, all religions, including Islam, were inherently problematic for women. Even though she was writing in the early years of the Indian anti-colonial nationalist movement, Rokeya did not subscribe to the Indian nationalist position that the Indian private sphere, and hence its denizens, women, were morally and spiritually superior to their Western counterparts.<sup>3</sup> Even though she was writing at the height of imperial Britain's preoccupation with downtrodden Indian and Muslim women, she was not particularly impressed with the Western model of women's emancipation or the efforts of some local male reformers to usher in modernity through the unveiling of women.

Rokeya was far from lenient with women themselves. In this same essay, she was critical not only of men and religion, but also of women, for their own role in perpetuating what she called their degraded status. In the passage that follows, she astutely anticipates late twentieth-century feminist arguments about the socially constructed nature of beauty and femininity:

And our beloved jewellery – these are [nothing but]...badges of slavery. Prisoners wear iron shackles... [and] we [lovingly] wear chains made of gold and silver... And how eager women are for [these signs of bondage]! As if life's happiness and enrichment depend solely on them... No matter how destructive alcohol is, the alcoholic does not want to give it up. Likewise we feel proud when we bear these marks of slavery on our bodies.<sup>4</sup>

I begin this piece with a close reading and analysis of some of Rokeya Hossain's writings on women's rights, situating them in the larger historical and cultural contexts in which they first appeared. I then turn to a discussion of the contexts in which these writings have *reappeared* more recently and explore the manner in which Rokeya has been used – and very importantly, *not* used – by feminists today. I conclude by considering the lessons her writings have for activists today who are struggling for a better future for men and women in South Asia and elsewhere.

## **Situating Rokeya**

Rokeya Hossain was born in 1880 into an educated, landowning family in the village of Pairaband, in what is now the Rangpur district of Bangladesh.

Although her brothers were first educated locally and then sent to college in Calcutta, she and her two sisters, like other daughters of aristocratic families of that time, were expected to observe strict *purdah* (literally curtain, referring to a range of practices from modest dress to spatial seclusion), and be educated only at home. As Rokeya noted in her essay ‘Ardhangi’ (The female half), this education consisted of learning the Arabic alphabet, followed by the reading of the Qur’an. She lamented that there was no expectation that these young girls would understand the meaning of the words they read, but simply ‘recite like a parrot from memory’. The furthest a woman might get with Arabic, with the encouragement of a supportive father, was to become a *hafeza*, one who had memorized the entire Qur’an. As for Farsi and Urdu, she remarked, it was difficult to make progress because there were no easy books for new learners. Finally, she complained bitterly, ‘even in Bengal, young girls are not taught Bengali in a systematic manner’.<sup>5</sup>

Although the educated Muslim Bengali elite of her time frowned on Bengali and preferred Urdu – because they felt Bengali was not sufficiently Islamic – Rokeya had the opportunity to master both Bengali and English with the help of a supportive older brother, older sister and husband.<sup>6</sup> She would dedicate the second volume of *Motichur*, her collection of previously published essays, to her *Apajaan* (beloved older sister) Karimunnessa with the following words:

In my childhood, it was by the grace of your affection that I learned to read the alphabet. Even if other relatives didn’t object so much to my reading Urdu or Farsi, they were strongly opposed to my reading Bengali. Only you were in favor of my reading Bengali. After my marriage, it was you who were fearful that I would completely forget the Bengali language. After spending 14 years in Bhagalpur, where I didn’t find a single person with whom to speak in Bengali, it is only because of your blessings that I have not forgotten Bengali.<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, for his role in her education, she dedicated her novel *Padmarag* (The Ruby) to her older brother Abul Asad Ibrahim Saber.

In 1896, Ibrahim arranged her marriage to Syed Sakhawat Hossain, a member of the Bengal Civil Service, then stationed in Bhagalpur, Bihar. He was a widower and several years older than Rokeya. He too supported Rokeya’s continued education and she was able to overcome her homesickness by channelling her energies into writing. Rokeya gave birth to two daughters, but neither survived beyond infancy. Sakhawat encouraged Rokeya to meet educated women of other communities in

Bhagalpur and this also helped Rokeya gain a new perspective on women, education and religion. She would later recall: 'If my dear husband had not been so supportive, I might never have written or published anything.'<sup>8</sup>

Rokeya started publishing in 1903, mainly essays on social issues that appeared in various magazines. She wrote primarily in Bengali, but in 1905 she published a short story in English in *Indian Ladies' Magazine*, a magazine based in Madras. The story was published as a book in Calcutta in 1908. Iraqi scholar Amin Malak has recently claimed that this short story, 'Sultana's Dream', is 'the first narrative ever published [anywhere] by a Muslim in English'.<sup>9</sup> 'Sultana's Dream' is about a utopian society called Ladyland where all the men lived in seclusion and women ran society, using science and technology in a responsible and ethical manner. This story predated the American Charlotte Perkins Gilman's own utopic story *Herland* by a full decade. Rokeya also translated into Bengali Marie Corelli's 1896 novel *The Murder of Delicia*.

Sakhawat passed away in 1909, of complications related to diabetes, and left Rokeya a large sum of money to be used specifically to support the education of Bengali Muslim women. She founded a girls' school in Bhagalpur that same year, but a family dispute soon forced her to move to Calcutta. The school she founded there in 1911 in her husband's name, Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, survives to this day. In 1916, she founded Anjuman-e-Khawatin-e-Islam, Bangla (Bengali Muslim Women's Association), an organization whose primary purpose was social work, including literacy training, among poor women.

Rokeya's foremost priority was the education of girls and women, not to produce better and modern mothers and wives, as much of her male contemporaries were arguing for at the time, but to develop their faculties and help them attain economic independence.<sup>10</sup> Eminently pragmatic, she initially offered classes in Urdu even though they were situated in Bengal; she knew that many families would not support the teaching of Bengali.<sup>11</sup> In her pragmatism, she also provided curtained transportation for the girls who attended her school. She knew that without such transportation, the girls would not be allowed to attend at all. Although she never came out of *purdah* herself (i.e. she always covered her hair), she was fiercely critical of the practice of seclusion, whereby women had separate quarters in elite homes that they were not allowed to leave. Importantly, she did not equate unveiling automatically with emancipation. Recognizing the superficiality

of the liberation bestowed on women by male reformers who were eager to impress Western powers, she commented thus on the situation within the Parsi (Zoroastrian) community in India, among the first to take up Western education and permit their women to wear Western dress:

Recently we see the Parsi women moving about unveiled, but are they truly free from mental slavery? Certainly not! Their unveiling is not a result of their own decision. The Parsi men have dragged their women out of purdah in a blind imitation of the Europeans. It does not show any initiative of their women. They are as lifeless as they were before. When their men kept them in seclusion they stayed there. When the men dragged them out by their 'nose-rings' they came out. That cannot be called an achievement by women.<sup>12</sup>

Rokeya was sharply criticized by men and women, Muslims and Hindus alike, during her lifetime – we know this from letters to the editors of the magazines in which she published articles<sup>13</sup> – but her writings that were more celebratory of Bengali culture and literature remained part of the curriculum in Bengali schools for much of the twentieth century. In the 1980s, with the rise of feminist activism globally as well as the institutionalization of academic feminism in many places, her more critical writings resurfaced. In Bangladesh, she was identified as a 'feminist foremother' and her essays were published as pamphlets rather than as part of a large collection, with the previously expunged portions restored in an appendix. The feminist publisher responsible for these pamphlets described her writings as the 'ABCs of women's awakening in Bangladesh' and explained that they chose the format of the pamphlet because the entire collection of her writings was not only visually intimidating, but also beyond the financial means of many people. If made available as thin pamphlets, the publisher pointed out, one could carry numerous copies all over the country in one's bag and distribute them easily and at little cost.<sup>14</sup>

Rokeya's work also travelled west around the same time. Both she and her contemporary, the Egyptian Huda Shaarawi, were introduced to the larger American public, especially college students, in the late 1980s, when their writings were published by the Feminist Press in New York. Both women were identified as pioneer Muslim feminists and these books helped to bolster the claims of feminists in Muslim countries that their ideas and movements had long, distinguished indigenous histories, and that they were not the agents of Westernization and imperialism that many nationalists and Islamists accused them of being. Indeed, in 1995, the date 9 December, believed to be Rokeya's birthday anniversary, was declared Begum Rokeya

Day and has been observed in the years since with Begum Rokeya awards from the head of state to individuals who have worked to further women's causes. That day also saw the publication of the Pairaband Declaration, after the village in which Rokeya was born. This document was published that day as a clarion call 'from democratic and progressive citizens for national unity in the struggle for women's emancipation'.<sup>15</sup>

## **A Radical Vision**

Although feminist activists and scholars have repeatedly described Rokeya Hossain as 'far ahead of her time', I would like to suggest that, while she was certainly a product of her time and class, her vision was in fact quite radical even by today's standards. For example, she is hailed as 'the trailblazer in the cause of the awakening of Muslim women'.<sup>16</sup> I'd like to argue, however, that she did not see herself as concerned only with Muslim Bengali women, or only with Muslim women or only with Bengali women. 'Sultana's Dream', for instance, begins with the sentence: 'One evening I was lounging in an easy chair... and thinking lazily about the condition of Indian womanhood.'<sup>17</sup> As Inderpal Grewal argues, such use of the terms 'woman' and 'womanhood' by Rokeya and many of her contemporaries reflected a sense in early twentieth-century India that 'being a woman is... an ontological state common to female persons across class, caste, and religion, but also in a political sense, as a position within society that is structurally open to oppression'. Early twentieth-century India, much like early twenty-first-century India, encompassed Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and Zoroastrians, and from her other writings we know that she did not shy away from pointing out the ill-treatment of women in other communities.<sup>18</sup>

As historian Sonia Amin observes, Rokeya clearly believed that gender oppression was a worldwide phenomenon. That 'she had no illusions about women of the "civilized" colonizing race (the British)' is clear from the following passage from 'Ardhangi' that Amin cites at length:

Though the Christian community has provided for female education, a woman does not possess full rights. Her mind is still enslaved... When the husband is immersed in debt, the wife is busy trying on her new bonnet [sic] because she has been trained to believe she is the personification of poetry; so she loves to grace the home as a poem incarnate. How can she comprehend matters like debt?<sup>19</sup>



Amin also gives an example of Rokeya's comments about Hindu ideals of womanhood:

Sita Devi was held up as a model woman. Sita was not a *purdanashin* (a woman who observes purdah) – she was Ram's *ardhangi* (female half), lover, comrade. And he was noble, pious and loving. But his treatment of Sita was that of a boy towards his pet toy...<sup>20</sup>

Amin goes on to argue that while Rokeya 'did not spare the Muslim community... her attacks were more guarded'. Amin does point out, however, that 'within her obeisance to scriptural authority in "Ardhangi" was a subversive passage', in which Rokeya questioned the notion that a woman is worth half of a man in certain Islamic legal contexts.<sup>21</sup> I would argue that, in her discussion of *all* religious communities, as in the opening epigraph, she made it clear that 'these religious texts are nothing but rules and regulations created by men'. I see no evidence in her writings that she was more circumspect in her criticism of Islam than in that of Christianity or Hinduism. In all three cases, she argued that religion was used to oppress women, albeit often in different ways.

The pressure on Rokeya Hossain to combine idealism with pragmatism – as she did in providing suitable transportation for the girls at her school and by remaining within the respectable bounds of *purdah* herself – continues to haunt us all today. She has served as an ideal mascot for the feminist movement in Bangladesh, which remains staunchly secularist because of the use and abuse of Islam during Bangladesh's troubled history with Pakistan, and also in order to be able to speak for the 12 per cent of the population that is not Muslim. Yet while today's feminists in Bangladesh have been happy to reinstate the expunged passages, they have been hesitant to criticize religion – their own or that of others – as openly as Rokeya did. Taslima Nasreen is a notable if problematic exception.

## **Lessons from Rokeya**

Rokeya's vision as well as her publication histories hold important lessons for us. It is striking that in her publication debut in the West, she was identified not as an early twentieth-century Indian or Bengali feminist who happens to be Muslim, but very much as an early *Muslim* Indian or Bengali feminist. To this day, dominant public discourse in the West seems unable to concede the possibility of secular Muslim feminists who may or may not

also be religious. One is either completely marked by one's embrace of religion or one's public rejection of it, as with Ayaan Hirsi Ali.

I think Rokeya's vision is an important reminder to us today not to forget the differences between women, but to be courageous enough to speak up about the oppression of human beings in all communities. It is increasingly hard to do, given global geopolitical realities and the attacks on Islam and Muslims, as well as sectarian and communal concerns in our own societies, but I think we need to find a way to do it. A broader and more inclusive feminism would lead those of us who are in the global South or affiliated with movements here to reflect more on our own positions in global circuits and networks of labour and capital. Just as we are today calling on US feminists to recognize their complicity in US-led wars overseas or in global US corporate practices, we too should avoid qualifying our feminism with national or cultural adjectives and start moving beyond terms like Bangladeshi feminism or Pakistani feminism or Arab feminism, and consider instead what it means to be a feminist *in* Bangladesh or *in* South Asia or *in* the Arab world. That would allow us to think about the needs and priorities of not just women, but a wide range of marginalized communities within our societies as well as those further away who are affected by our choices and decisions. In Bangladesh, for instance, this would include the large non-Bengali so-called tribal populations, the young women sent off from Bangladeshi villages to the East End of London in arranged marriages to men they have never met before, as well as the young women that constitute part of Bangladesh's labour export. In the Arab world, this would include, for example, not only the *bedoun* or the marginalized sexual communities that colleagues at this conference have already mentioned, but also the large expatriate communities from the global South, that keep all these economies running.

I glean from Rokeya Hossain, then, a call to be locally situated and contextually informed but also universal in one's outlook at the same time. What we need today then is not so much south-south linkages, but an intricate spider's web linking all points of the compass (north-south, east-west, east-south, etc.) in which we are always aware of our local specificities but also our very real connections in *all* directions.

## Notes

\* Rice University, Houston, Texas.

1. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (2002), *Strijatir Abonoti* (The Downfall of Women) (Dhaka: Narigrantha Prabartana), p. 21. I have also drawn on the partial translation of this section provided by Mahua Sarkar in her *Visible Histories, Disappearing Women: Producing Muslim Womanhood in Late Colonial Bengal* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), p. 119.
2. *Nabanoor*, one of the earliest periodicals to be published by Muslim intellectuals in Bengal, appeared between 1903 and 1906.
3. See Partha Chatterjee (1989), 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (Kali for Women) (New Delhi), pp. 233–53; and Faisal Devji (1994), 'Gender and the politics of space: the movement for women's reform 1857– 1900', in Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities: Gender, Communities and the State in India* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press).
4. Hossain, *Strijatir Abonoti*, p. 3; this translation is taken from Sarkar, *Visible Histories*, p. 122.
5. Harunur Rashid Bhuiyan (ed.) (2004), *Begum Rokeya Rachonashamogro* (Begum Rokeya – Collected Works) (Hashi Prokashoni), p. 39.
6. For a discussion of the process of Bengalicization among the Muslim Bengali elite in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Sonia Nishat Amin (1996), *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Leiden: E.J. Brill), pp. 18– 21; see also Sufia Ahmed (1996), *Muslim Community in Bengal 1884–1912*, second edition (Dhaka: The University Press Limited ).
7. Bhuiyan, *Begum Rokeya Rachonashamogro*, p. 65.
8. Cited in Roushan Jahan (1988), 'Rokeya: an introduction to her life', in Rokeya Hossain, *Sultana's Dream* (CUNY, New York: Feminist Press), p. 40.
9. Amin Malak (2005), *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (New York, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 2.
10. Jahan, 'Rokeya', p. 49; Amin, *The World of Muslim Women*, p. 205.
11. Mofarrah Sattar (2001), 'Begum Rokeya: a brief introduction and the struggle', in Afroz Akmal, *Begum Rokeya: Shongrami Ek Protilombi* (Begum Rokeya: An Image of Struggle) (Dhaka: Bangladesh National Museum), p. 125.
12. Hossain, *Strijatir Abanati*, p. 27; cited in Jahan, 'Rokeya', p. 50.
13. See, for example, in Sarkar, *Visible Histories*.
14. Farida Akhtar, 'Foreword' to Hossain, *Strijatir Abonoti*.
15. *Pairaband Declaration* (Pairaband Declaration Preparation Committee, 1995).
16. Maleka Begum (1989), *Banglar Nari Andolon* (Women's Movement of Bengal) (Dhaka: Dhaka University Press), p. 85; cited in Bharati Ray (2002), *Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 113.
17. Inderpal Grewal (1994), 'Autobiographic subjects and diasporic locations: *Meatless Days* and *Borderlands*', in Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (eds), *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press), p. 243.
18. Barnita Bagchi (2010), 'Two lives: voices, resources, and networks in the history of female education in Bengal and South Asia', *Women's History Review*, 19, pp. 1, 51–69.
19. Cited in Amin, *The World of Muslim Women*, p. 224.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 225.
21. *Ibid.*

## PART FOUR

# Feminism in a Global Context

## CHAPTER 34

# Tracing Dollars, Mapping Colonial Feminism: America Funds Women's 'Democracy' Training in Iraq

*Shahrzad Mojab\**

### **An encounter**

In 1997, I attended the meeting of the Women in Conflict Zones Network, a consortium of researchers, activists, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), representatives of UN organizations, humanitarian aid agencies and human rights groups.<sup>1</sup> Each one of us, located in a different region of the world, was trying to make sense of women's experiences of war, militarization and violence. In this meeting, half-way through going around introducing ourselves, a woman representing an NGO started her remarks by calmly saying: '... before continuing further, I need to pause for a moment and ask the woman who identified herself as an adult educator to explain to me what does it mean to be an adult educator and what do they do?' I was both perplexed and intrigued by the question. I tried my best to define our 'elusive' field. She interrupted me and continued, this time in a frustrated voice:

in my organization, we have been inundated with flashy consultancy products which all claim to use adult education principles and philosophy to provide training programs on conflict resolution, peace education, team building, participatory decision-making, creating consensus in war-torn communities, participatory human rights fact-finding missions, community need assessment, planning, evaluation, and much more.

In brief, she was wondering what adult education had to do with 'managing conflict in war zones', as she put it. This encounter put me on a path for

discovery; to search for new places and spaces where adult education acts in unison with imperialism to create the ideological conditions for the perpetuation of the social relations of submission.

The US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan provided an opportunity to study relations between imperialism and adult education in a contemporary and concrete context. The 2003 American project of ‘regime change’ in Iraq was violent and destructive, and led to more violence and destruction. The war has continued to this day, and it is difficult to talk about *post-war* reconstruction. The USA has in fact launched a number of projects ranging from (re-)training security and armed forces to ‘democracy training’ of elite women activists. In this chapter, I analyse ‘democracy’ training programmes in Iraq as the ideological practice of the ‘post-war reconstruction’ of an imperialist power. I argue that a careful analysis of the pedagogy, practice and politics of ‘democracy’ training programmes directs us to indistinct places where adult education ideas and practices converge with imperialist relations of domination. My goal is to make visible the process of this convergence and, thus, to contribute to the theorization of the relationship between ideological practices of adult education and capitalist social relations in the age of imperialism. The Marxist dialectical and historical materialist approach, as articulated in the work of educators such as Allman, Au, Colley, Rikowski, and Youngman,<sup>2</sup> informs my analysis. Marxist-feminist analyses of genderized and racialized imperialist social relations constitute the conceptual core of this chapter. This perspective is being articulated by a critical adult educator collective whose work has appeared in the book that I co-edited with Sara Carpenter entitled *Educating from Marx: Race, Gender, and Learning*.

The empirical evidence for this chapter draws on my extensive fieldwork in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq in 2005, as well as publications of the US and Iraqi governments, NGOs and media reports; the chapter also builds on the critical feminist literature on women’s NGOs, war, militarization, ‘post-war’ reconstruction and women’s learning. I examine the relationship between imperialism and US women’s NGOs and their symbiotic relations by focusing on US projects of ‘democracy training’ in Iraq.

## **The context<sup>3</sup>**

The first US war against Iraq in 1991 led to considerable chaos in the country and the region. Iraq was divided into a semi-independent Kurdish region in the north and a devastated Arab south subjected to devastating economic sanctions. The second US war in 2003 overthrew the Ba'th regime and replaced it with a US occupation administration. Although a fledgling Iraqi government has replaced the US colonial administration, the state of political, military and economic chaos continues to destroy the lives of Iraqi people. Failing to find a strong social base to maintain its domination over the country, the USA has engaged in a variety of strategies including training leaders loyal to the occupation project and capable of keeping Iraq in the US orbit. One of these strategies is a comprehensive 'democracy' training programme, involving women in particular. A careful analysis of the pedagogy, practice and politics of 'democracy' training programmes throws light on the ways in which adult education ideas and practices converge with imperialist desire and design. The purpose of this chapter is to trace and explain the process of this convergence.

The imperialist wars of recent decades have raised serious challenges for adult education. The wars led by the United States, as the super-military force among Western powers, have created new social/educational needs. National and international policies shaped by the 'war on terror', 'clash of civilizations' and 'security culture' demand new mass-based formal and informal learning strategies. At a global level, war has also turned into a 'development' process under the rubric of 'post-war reconstruction'. The training of large cadres, from NGOs to peace or aid workers, to community developers, and other more specialized bureaucrats and technocrats, all are involved in adult learning, training and education. Learning plans, the development of curricula and pedagogical techniques, to sell the ideology of 'post-war reconstruction' using notions such as 'empowerment', 'democracy' and 'freedom', are emerging examples of the response of adult learning to the social conditions created by imperialist desire for expansion and occupation. US military analysts have theorized this process by arguing for a closer link between post-war 'reconstruction' projects or humanitarian-aid effort and the military.<sup>4</sup> Although ties between military and development, military and war/peace propaganda, or the idea of 'humanization' of military do not constitute a new 'strategy', the concerted effort in legitimizing the link through thick theorization is astonishing. In September 2002, the Bush administration released a National Security

Strategy in which development was one of the ‘... three strategic areas of emphasis (along with diplomacy and defense)’.<sup>5</sup> The release of this document put the spotlight on the US Agency for International Development (USAID), the major player in the ‘post-war reconstruction’ projects in Afghanistan and Iraq. Andrew Natsios, a retired Lieutenant Colonel, with extensive experience in development work and aid policy, has articulated ‘Nine principles of reconstruction and development’:

At a basic, theoretical level, the Nine Principles of Reconstruction and Development are inspired by the Nine Principles of War, which are inscribed in modern Army field manuals. In the past decade, the military has attempted to forge a closer theoretical link between post-conflict development work and military interventions.... More recently, especially since 9/11, there has been a growing recognition that conflict should be defined in more fluid terms; that the line between formal military engagement and informal insurgencies is increasingly blurred. As a result, military thinking has evolved and now incorporates the phrase ‘stability operations’ as a term of art to describe post-conflict nation-building efforts.<sup>6</sup>

This is a recipe for conducting successful ‘stability operations’ through links between ‘development’ and ‘military intervention’. Education is called on to be an actor in the hyper-militarization of the post-conflict agenda which includes ‘nation-building efforts’ such as the rebuilding of armies and police forces, patrolling by international forces, ongoing combat between security forces and insurgent groups, and especially increased dependence on militarized humanitarian and development aid.

In August 2005, at the time of my visit, almost all women’s NGOs were preoccupied with discussing the draft of the Iraqi Constitution. They complained about ‘being workshopped out’ of the constitution. This constitutional rousing was a response to the US administration plan in legitimizing its own rule in Iraq. The then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, in announcing the recipient of grants for reconstruction of Iraq, said that each of the grantees ‘will work with Iraq partners on the ground to prepare women to compete in Iraq’s January 2005 elections, encourage women to vote, train women in media and business skills, and establish resource centres for networking and counselling’. Since the 2003 occupation, I have undertaken a forensic ethnographical cyber-based investigation of the funding process of women’s NGOs in Northern Iraq, an investigation which I have called ‘Tracing dollars, mapping feminist-colonial relations: US State Department funding for women’s democracy training in Iraq’. On International Women’s Day, 8 March 2004, then Secretary of State, Colin Powell, announced a \$10 million, Iraqi Women’s Democracy Initiative



(IWDI), and inaugurated the 'U.S. Iraq Women's Network' that would help to administer the fund.

The Network is modelled after the 'US-Afghan Women's Council' whose main activities centre on job training and 'other economic opportunities'. The six first grantees were the International Republican Institute, the National Democratic Institute, the Independent Women's Forum, the Art of Living Foundation, Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies and Kurdish Human Rights Watch.

In 2006, a fact sheet released by the Office of International Women's Issues stated that along with NGO partners, the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative grantees provided 'civic training' to over 60,000 Iraqi women, whereas in 2005 the official number of Iraqi women trained through the IWDI was only 2,000. In 2007, yet another initiative was announced, with a mandate similar to the US-Iraqi Women's Network, and the Iraqi Women's Gift Fund, called the US-Iraqi Businesswomen's Partnership (USIBP). According to a fact sheet, the partnership would bring American women entrepreneurs together with Iraqi counterparts in a virtual mentoring programme through to December 2007. For 2008-9, an additional \$10 million has been allocated by Congress for a third phase of human rights and democracy programmes for women, in addition to the initial \$10 million in 2004 and \$4.5 million in 2006.

One of the groups funded under the Iraqi Women's Democracy Initiative is the Independent Women's Forum (IWF). According to an IWF press release, it was granted these funds in order to 'provide leadership training, democracy education and coalition building assistance' to Iraqi women. The IWF's mission statement says that it was 'established to combat the women-as-victim, pro-big-government ideology of radical feminism'. It also states that 'IWF fosters greater respect for limited government, equality under the law, property rights, free markets, strong families, and a powerful and effective national defense and foreign policy'. Some of its main struggles in the USA have included lobbying against the Violence against Women Act, and opposing the enforcement of the Equal Pay Act on the grounds that the wage gap between men and women is a myth. Further, the IWF sponsored a study that criticizes women's studies curricula and assigned readings in the USA, saying that women would learn more about gender construction by reading Shakespeare's play *The Taming of the Shrew*. IWF's board of directors has included Lynne Cheney, wife of Vice

President Cheney, Wendy Lee Gramm, wife of former Enron board member, Texas Senator Phil Gramm, and Kate O'Beirne.

Kurdish women were seriously concerned about the 'religious nature' of the constitution. Despite their effort in lobbying the Kurdish regional government in writing to the drafting committee, and discussing it in the Kurdish media and women's press, the final version of the constitution is based on Islamic canonical law (i.e. *sharia*), which advocates the union of the state and mosque. The Kurdish leadership, preoccupied with maintaining self-rule under a federalist regime, made concessions on the issue of women's rights vs. federalism. Isobel Coleman writes:

As the arguments dragged on, US Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad finally intervened to avoid a stalemate. To gain concession in other areas, he supported provisions that strengthened Islam's influence. Ultimately, the Kurds acquiesced too, both because they had other priorities to defend and because they recognized that conservative Shiites were not going to capitulate [on limiting women's rights].<sup>7</sup>

Article 2 of the constitution makes Islam the official religion of the state and the basic source of legislation. What became apparent was that the presence of women in the public sphere, such as NGOs, does not necessarily guarantee a progressive change in gender relations; there is a need for feminist consciousness, women's movements and collective struggles. For Kurdish and Arab women of Iraq, this is undoubtedly a long and arduous struggle.

Most of the Kurdish women in the leadership of NGOs have taken part in conferences, meetings or workshops organized by the IWF in Kurdistan, Iraq, or Amman, Jordan. The question we need to ask is: What 'democracy' lessons do Kurdish women have to learn from an anti-feminist organization? Why should Kurdish women's national and feminist aspirations be harnessed by colonial, racist and anti-feminist agendas? I am seriously pondering responses to these questions and I think as long as Kurdish women remain devoted to the cause of nation/nationalism and its dream of building a masculine, patriarchal and bourgeois modern state, they will have to compromise the cause of women's emancipation. It is already known that women in the leadership position of NGOs are not leaders of women's movement; they, rather, constitute a new transnational technocratic elite class with the power to create the best local conditions for transnational capitalist reconstruction projects.<sup>8</sup>

## A democracy promotion<sup>9</sup>

While visiting women's NGOs, I collected documentation on the funded projects as well as the curriculum of diverse training programmes for women. My intention was to review the content of their training curriculum in order to probe into the ideological underpinnings of the 'democracy training project'. One of the documents, *Foundations of Democracy: Teacher's Guide*,<sup>10</sup> was intended as a reference for democracy and civic education training in Northern Iraq. This curriculum is produced by the Center for Civic Education, based in the USA and funded by a grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) as well as a grant from the Danforth Foundation. The OJJDP works from the premise that 'Juveniles in crisis – from serious, violent, and chronic offenders to victims of abuse and neglect – pose a challenge to the nation', and that they have to be policed and controlled.<sup>11</sup> This pathologizing logic of the individual as the source of social problems has been problematized in the work of Colley, Eccelstone and Pupavac.<sup>12</sup> This logic serves to reproduce social inequalities by separating the individual from the objective social reality of inequality.

The curriculum is organized around four concepts of authority, privacy, responsibility and justice. It instructs teachers to promote compromise and consensus. The 'Bible, Koran, or Torah' are presented as examples of sources for moral authority.<sup>13</sup> These religious texts have, however, been critiqued for their promotion of patriarchal models of authority and for offering a blueprint for the subordination of women. The gendered, Orientalist and colonialist ideological underpinnings of the training manual, *Foundations of Democracy* (1997),<sup>14</sup> are best manifested in one of the lessons it offers – the story of 'Bill Russell and Red Cloud'. In this story, Bill Russell and Amy Clark, two 'pioneers', are sent to 'negotiate' with Red Cloud and Morning Sun, two indigenous persons from the Cheyenne tribe. Following the story, there is a set of questions about where each of the four characters derived their authority. It is interesting to note that the only person who derived authority from consent is Bill Russell, representing the white-male-rational thinker. In other words, the settler or occupier is presented as the authority. The other pioneers 'consented' to send him to negotiate. His female counterpart derived her authority directly from

Russell, who chose her as an assistant. In other words, she derived her authority from the male authority with power over her. Red Cloud derived his authority from 'custom', and Morning Sun derived her authority from 'morality' because 'she possessed great wisdom' and was the spiritual leader of the tribe. This portrayal of legitimate female authority is consistent with the patriarchal, feudal, religious nationalism that perceives women's role as the pillar of moral strength in both the family and nation. The story normalizes the genocide of the indigenous peoples of North America carried out by European settlers by labelling it as 'conflicts created by the westward migration'.<sup>15</sup> It portrays the 'conflict' as one between two groups having equal say and power to negotiate, as opposed to the disparate power relations that characterize colonialism and occupation. In the story, consent is associated with the colonizer and custom with the indigenous man. In this context, the occupier is represented as the mediator of conflict and the occupied as the guardian of old conflicts. I should note that the Red Cloud example has been replaced with a narrative about 'Bubble Land' in the 2000 edition. Bubble Land is a fictional location with non-human characters. In this fantasy land, nonetheless, it is important to learn that 'authority' is necessary or else chaos ensues. The curricula are presented as non-'conventional texts which focus on facts, dates, people, and events. Rather *Foundations of Democracy* is about ideas, values, and principles fundamental to understanding our constitutional democracy'.<sup>16</sup> This claim is an explicit rejection of the historical development of democracy in favour of an idealist notion of the term. It is also a rejection of the learners' history as an always historical and changing experience. The idea here is that democracy is not about what actually happens, but rather principles that float above the 'conventionality' of history. The curriculum also describes how one should use authority. It states that we use authority: (1) to protect our safety and our property; (2) to help manage conflict peacefully and fairly; (3) to distribute the benefits and burdens of society; and (4) to maintain order.<sup>17</sup> Authority in this context is constituted as the arbitrator of equality. This is a characteristic of the capitalist notion of democracy. In this form of democracy, Allman explains, citizens alienate their political power and capacities by handing them over to elected representatives, over whom they have little or no day-to-day influence or control.<sup>18</sup> In order to establish this bourgeois model of democracy in Iraq, occupation was soon followed by setting up an election process.

## Conclusions

Rejecting the colonial feminism of the USA, I insist that a feminist, anti-imperialist framework must simultaneously challenge the cruelty and misogyny of native or national patriarchies alongside the racism and sexism of the imperialist powers. My own experience of participating in the women's movements in the Middle East has convinced me that colonial and native patriarchies and their 'feminisms' constitute not a contradiction but, rather, symbiotic relationships. Instead of contributing to this symbiosis, feminist scholarship should challenge the two patriarchal regimes and the global imperialist order that thrives on them. From this perspective, post-conflict recovery involves, among other things, organizing highly politicized feminist and women's movements that challenge local and imported patriarchies, fundamentalism, racism and imperialism. Resisting colonial feminist projects requires pedagogical theories and practices that cross the boundaries set by cultural relativism, nativism and nationalism.

## Notes

\* University of Toronto, Canada.

1. For an overview of the objective and history of the network, visit [www.yorku.ca/wicz](http://www.yorku.ca/wicz).
2. Paula Allman (1999), *Revolutionary Social Transformation: Democratic Hopes, Political Possibilities and Critical Education* (Westport, CT and London: Bergin and Garvey); Paul Allman (2001), *Critical Education Against Global Capitalism: Karl Marx and Revolutionary Critical Education* (Westport, CT and London: Bergin and Garvey); Paula Allman (2007), *On Marx: An Introduction to the Revolutionary Intellect of Karl Marx* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers); Wayne Au (2007), 'Epistemology of the oppressed: the dialectics of Paulo Freire's theory of knowledge', *Journal of Critical Education Policy Studies*, 5(2), 13 pp.; H. Colley (2002), 'A rough guide to the history of mentoring from a Marxist feminist perspective', *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 28(3), pp. 257–73; Glenn Rikowski (2001), 'Education for industry: a complex technicism', in *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), pp. 29–49; Glenn Rikowski (2002), 'Fuel for the living fire: Labour-power!' in Ana C. Dinerstein and Michael Neary (eds), *The Labour Debate: An Investigation into the Theory and Reality of Capitalist Work* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing Limited); Frank Youngman (1986), *Adult Education and Socialist Pedagogy* (London: Croom Helm).
3. The analysis on this section is based on my chapter entitled 'Imperialism, "post-war reconstruction" and Kurdish Women's NGOs', in Nadjie al-Ali and Nicola Pratt (eds), *Women and War in the Middle East: Transnational Perspectives* (London: Zed Books, 2009).
4. Andrew S. Natsios (2008), 'The nine principles of reconstruction and development', *Parameters*, US Army War College (Summer), pp. 4–20; Mick Ryan (2008), 'The military and reconstruction operations,' *Parameters*, US Army War College (Summer), pp. 58–70.
5. Natsios, 'The nine principles of reconstruction and development', p. 4.
6. Ibid., p. 7.

7. Isobel Coleman, 'Women, Islam, and the new Iraq', *Foreign Affairs*, 1(85) (January/February 2006).
8. Williams Robinson (1996), *Promoting Polyarchy: Globalization, US Intervention, and Hegemony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
9. I am currently working on further theorization of the 'democracy' training programmes and have named this process 'learning by dispossession', borrowing from David Harvey's conception of accumulation by dispossession.
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## CHAPTER 35

# Gender in Modern Counterinsurgency

*Laleh Khalili\**

### Introduction

Counterinsurgency – defined as asymmetrical warfare by a powerful military against irregular combatants supported by a civilian population – is as old as warfare itself, but has been a mainstay of colonial war-fighting and imperial policing. Since the end of the Cold War, counterinsurgency has come to be considered the most significant and frequent form of warfare to be fought across the world and into the future.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the long history of ‘small’ wars and colonial counterinsurgencies, today’s advocates of counterinsurgency present it as the ‘soft option’ in warfare, especially as compared with scorched earth military tactics where annihilation of the enemy has been the end goal. In the counterinsurgency doctrine advanced in the *US Army and Marines Counterinsurgency Manual (FM3-24)*, kinetic force (or the killing capacity of the military) is to take backstage, foregrounding developmental language and agendas such as ‘a vibrant economy, political participation, and restored hope’,<sup>2</sup> the use of local proxies<sup>3</sup> and ‘the integration of civilian and military efforts’ including aid and governance,<sup>4</sup> in order ultimately to win over a largely uncommitted civilian population.

This coding of counterinsurgency as the civilianized option aimed at winning the hearts and minds of civilian populations has a particularly gendered character. What I mean by gendering is a set of practices and discourses that constitute ‘men’ and ‘women’ *and* masculinities and femininities in particular ways. Gendering is neither about women alone,<sup>5</sup>

nor is it a pure and autonomous dichotomy. Rather, masculinities and femininities, especially in imperial contexts, are already always ‘cross-hatched’ with racial and class designations.<sup>6</sup> We know from a wealth of scholarship that war and violence have always been gendered, classed and racialized, not only in the practical way they are fought but also in the longer term or quotidian manner they shape social relations.<sup>7</sup> What is new with counterinsurgency is the extent to which the centrality of civilians as potential objects of military operations is acknowledged in doctrine and practice. The complex process by which ‘civilians’ are mapped to particular gender grids, and men and women are ‘read’ and interpellated according to the constructed notion of ‘civilian’, is one of the central forms that this counterinsurgency gendering takes. Further, counterinsurgency doctrine and practice directly bring those bodies and spaces previously coded as ‘private’ or ‘feminine’ – women, non-combatant men and the spaces of the ‘home’ – into the battlefield; transform cities and homes and persons into highly gendered segments of the ‘physical and human terrain’; and utilize detailed knowledge about the quotidian (both perceived and coded as feminine) as ‘ethnographic intelligence’.<sup>8</sup> This conquered and gendered space, in which an indigenous population is controlled, surveilled, monitored and made to acquiesce, is the first site of gendered practices of counterinsurgency.

Gender demographics are here often invoked as both justification for targeting young men and, more instrumentally, for planning military action. ‘Youth bulges’, a demographic profusion of men between the ages of 15 and 30, especially in Muslim countries, is seen as a structural condition underlying extremism, and as a ‘problem’ to be addressed militarily in faraway places. Young men are seen as an automatically useful resource for radical recruitment, and women’s education and job-creation programmes are advocated as ‘necessary antidotes’.<sup>9</sup> This ostensible gender imbalance is utilized to demobilize militant groups. As a former US defence official wrote: ‘governments can use groups’ ambivalence about female members to state advantage. Israel and Russia use stories of socially marginal women being exploited by men to discredit terrorist groups and explain away female violence.’<sup>10</sup>

A more difficult route to countering the ostensible effects of the youth bulge is through economic development. Like a great deal of social science written in support of US counterinsurgencies in the 1960s, the



contemporary material about nation-building inherits much from the modernization theory advanced by Walt Rostow and his colleagues in the 1960s. Here, the salvation stage of liberal democracy requires economic development and one of the most prominent pathways of economic development is the socio-economic advancement of women. In this literature, women are essentialized as being less corrupt, more efficient, better for economic development and less warlike.<sup>11</sup> The feminized security discourse is deployed by all and sundry, and gender mainstreaming becomes even central to military intervention.<sup>12</sup> Policy makers, for example, argue that by providing economic development specifically to suit women, women can be saved from alienation and thus radicalization. Women are cast as wholly socio-economic beings, divested of politics or ethics. Under the heading of ‘Why the Military Should Care’, two US officers, both of them women, suggest that ‘by collaborating with USAID and using [Women in Development]’s expertise on gender integration as part of a comprehensive counterterrorism strategy, the military can more effectively address the negative socioeconomic conditions that make areas ripe for terrorist exploitation’.<sup>13</sup> In a highly influential and much-circulated set of guidance notes, the counterinsurgency guru David Kilcullen similarly argues that

coopting neutral or friendly women, through targeted social and economic programs, builds networks of enlightened self-interest that eventually undermine the insurgents.... Win the women, and you own the family unit. Own the family, and you take a big step forward in mobilizing the population [on the side of the counterinsurgents].<sup>14</sup>

A significant element of counterinsurgency thus becomes provision of social services which are often allocated to women and are seen as another way in which counterinsurgency action can win over a local population into collaboration and loyalty. For example, a Rand analyst (and the wife of Bush Administration official Zalmay Khalilzad) writes:

Health-care operations have been particularly effective in winning local support [in Afghanistan]. On repeated occasions, female patients in health clinics, thankful for care received and motivated to support the new order that provided it, have volunteered valuable tactical information to U.S. forces.<sup>15</sup>

Just as important, the very sites of counterinsurgency are usually civilian spaces that are then walled off (both figuratively and literally) as a subsection of the battle-space, a grid square that can be more easily

pacified. In counterinsurgency, all spaces, and perhaps especially urban quarters, are seen as potential battlegrounds by the counterinsurgents. The conventional privacy measures for homes and the peacefulness of everyday spaces are no longer guaranteed. Spaces often not only coded as feminine, but also considered women's domain (homes, hospitals and schools especially), are frequently invaded by counterinsurgents.<sup>16</sup> These 'private' or civilian spaces – the home, the school, the hospital, the market, the village – are increasingly targeted in modern wars, and in fact were specifically the object of intense bombing in conventional warfare in the twentieth century. What counterinsurgency does, however, is to try to transform these spaces without necessarily destroying them (although destruction – especially in the wake of population resettlement – is often inevitable), thus co-opting everyday spaces into the landscape of war. Inevitably, these everyday landscapes are inhabited by civilians who are also made to be figures in the ongoing counterinsurgency.

Another gendering happens through the targeting of men. In Iraq and Palestine, in the cordoned cities where retinal scans, thumb prints, identity cards and registers of residence are used to monitor the populations, men between the ages of 15 or 16 and 50 are considered the primary target of this intensive, aggressive and invasive surveillance.<sup>17</sup>

In the US 'war on terror' the gendering of the face-to-face encounter between the US military and the indigenous Iraqi and Afghan populations has been very conspicuous. This is not only the case in the starkly sexualized imagery and practices of interrogation in Abu Ghraib, Guantánamo and elsewhere,<sup>18</sup> but also in the hierarchies and discourses produced in the context of US forces training indigenous police and military divisions. I call this second site of gendering the seam of encounter, where the 'imperial grunts'<sup>19</sup> – who are the foot-soldiers of the US military, often from lower class backgrounds, frequently belonging to African-American or Latino or non-citizen communities, and sometimes women – directly and repeatedly encounter the conquered, whether the latter are those detained and subjected to interrogation or the local proxy security forces being trained by the US military. Here, gendering takes a variety of forms, but most prominent are transformation of sexuality into technologies of coercion, the infliction of abjection via effeminizing practices, and the attempt at securing acquiescence through reproducing gendered, raced and classed hierarchies.

Here, two groups in particular stand out: the women from the invading and occupying military; and the local men who serve as the proxy enforcers of order for the invading military.

In the first instance, the displacement of inequalities to a neo-colonial setting suddenly inverts orders of hierarchy, and women from disadvantaged backgrounds can suddenly become powerful players positioned against and above local males. The peculiarities of this positioning, where working-class women from the least privileged parts of the USA found themselves in positions of power vis-à-vis Iraqi men, has been best personified in the narratives about Lynndie England and Sabrina Harman. England and Harman have become iconic figures, symbolizing the torture inflicted upon Iraqi men in the Abu Ghraib prison. The former held a leash encircling the neck of a naked Iraqi man curled up into a vulnerable fetal position; the latter had herself photographed smiling cherubically and giving a thumbs-up sign while leaning close to the dead body of a visibly bruised and battered Iraqi general. The US prison guards and interrogators who had inflicted pain upon Iraqi captives never managed to generate the same sense of disgust as England and Harman; they were never made the archetypes of US torture, nor did their names come to be as universally known as the two figures above. Not only were England and Harman the iconic representations of transgressive women, they were also subtly the embodiment of a new hierarchy of power, in which white women were automatically placed in a superior position to men who in other circumstances would have been the expected superiors (as an Iraqi general's class position would be more privileged than that of a daughter of a police detective (Harman) or a poultry factory worker (England)). Similarly, in the instances where women have been used as interrogators, their bodies and their sexuality have been deployed as technologies of power. In one of the most disturbing accounts of interrogations at the Guantánamo Bay prisons, a male interrogator writes about female interrogators using their breasts, their bodies and their menstrual blood as necessary tools for achieving dictated aims.<sup>20</sup>

A second space in the seam of encounter where genders are inflected through racial, class, or imperial hierarchies is the site of encounter between the US military men and the local security forces who act as proxies for the conquering military. Training and developing indigenous police and military forces is a central tenet of counterinsurgency. The tasks here

include ‘developing a U.S.-style training base, embedding advisors, initiating an intensive collective training program, and partnering American units with indigenous units’.<sup>21</sup> Yet the local men, who often risk opprobrium, and who often join the security forces as a way of guaranteeing a livelihood in conditions where security is the only steady sort of income, are constantly berated, ‘effeminized’, called ‘women’ or ‘pussies’ and seen as inadequate and passive enforcers of good order by their trainers.<sup>22</sup> Here, masculinity alone does not form the basis of transnational solidarity, and again, gender hierarchies are strongly shaded by other factors, such as ‘class, “race”/ ethnicity, language and religion, subcultures, sexualities and almost any other form through which humans understand difference, and strive to make it count’.<sup>23</sup>

The third site of gendering is the location of production of counterinsurgency policy and doctrine. Most strikingly, a new form of masculinity emerges, authorized by consumerism and neoliberal feminism, in which ‘manliness’ is softened, and the sensitive masculinity of the humanitarian soldier-scholar (white, literate, articulate and doctorate-festooned) overshadows the hyper-masculinity of warrior kings (or indeed of the racialized imperial grunts). This concurrent transformation of what masculinity or femininity may mean in the domain of policy making allows spaces for white middle-class women civilians to move into prestigious political positions as counterinsurgents,<sup>24</sup> all the while casting their own advance as a broader victory for the universal woman.

The soldier-scholars are numerous and now well known. They are also overwhelmingly represented in the ranks of the counterinsurgents. David Petraeus (PhD in international relations), David Kilcullen (PhD in political science) and John Nagl (PhD in history) are all vocal, articulate and highly educated military (or ex-military) men, all of whom are ranked above captain, all of whom are engaged in policy making vis-à-vis the war on terror, and all of whom are enthusiastic counterinsurgents. Some have written influential books and articles on counterinsurgency, others have been online or think-tank presences pushing forward a counterinsurgency agenda, while Petraeus directed the US war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan, and later led the CIA. Not only is the soldier-scholar the ultimate in civic virtue, he is also the embodiment of international wisdom, war-fighting prowess and a kind of knowingness about the world. This transformation in the notion of masculinity is reflected in blogs and ad-hoc writing produced

about counterinsurgency. The counterinsurgents want to be ‘soldiers’ and find the term ‘warrior’ troubling. Thus, when Nathan Sassaman calls himself ‘the Warrior King’, he and his book are roundly criticized by the counterinsurgents.<sup>25</sup>

Alongside this new form of masculinity, a much more familiar colonial feminism is crucial in advancing the new metropolitan warrior femininity. The colonial feminism of today deploys the language of humanitarian rescue.<sup>26</sup> A

feminized security rhetoric has become commonplace in the administration, so much so that it is typical for an official who gives a speech about American actions in Iraq and Afghanistan or about the U.S. policy of promoting democracy around the world to draw the connection to the pursuit of women’s rights.<sup>27</sup>

The colonial feminism even admonishes ‘the terrorists’ for not picking women. A former Pentagon official complains that:

In the years since [Leila] Khaled’s hijackings, women’s involvement in Palestinian terrorism has been either inconsistent or invisible. Even after proving their success as hijackers, bombers, and cover for men, women have to remind terrorist leaders of their tactical usefulness.<sup>28</sup>

This colonial feminism appeals to a new category of women policy makers who pride themselves in a kind of collaborative warrior femininity. These counterinsurgent women not only deploy a gendered analysis in their discussion of counterinsurgency but also use feminist justifications for their involvement: ‘we aren’t going to win by telling half the population they can’t play’.<sup>29</sup>

Even (perhaps especially) here, gendering is never innocent of racial or class hierarchies. Women are increasingly entering the militaries of European and North American nations and becoming further integrated into combat (or combat-support) roles,<sup>30</sup> albeit in racialized and hierarchical sorts of ways, while more and more white middle-class women also enter the higher ranks of policy making. It must be of some significance that three out of four most recent US Secretaries of State have been women; less commented upon has been the increasingly more visible presence of women – white, middle-class, educated women – in the US Department of Defense and in security-related think-tanks. This rise of a particular category of women, espousing a particular species of feminism, is itself indicative of a kind of femininity which is comfortable with, and in fact positively values, breaking through security spaces coded as masculine, and which

appropriates many of the ‘new masculine’ qualities of the soldier-scholars, perhaps as a subspecies of what Judith Butler has provocatively called drag, or ‘an uncritical appropriation of sex-role stereotyping’.<sup>31</sup> These female security-workers celebrate work in masculinist policy spaces and with the military as an index of ‘having made it’, in this case into the often-closed domain of military masculinity.

## Conclusions

To conclude, the gendered, racialized and class-inflected hierarchy of power that emerges out of the US era of counterinsurgency in the twenty-first century shows how new warrior masculinity regenerates itself through the figure of the soldier-scholar, and the manner in which the self-declared emancipatory feminist project is co-opted by the metropolitan power complex in its projection of power and force overseas. This reproduction of resilient and new forms of masculinity and femininity shows not only the flexibility of the machinery of rule, but also the dynamic recreation of power *hierarchies* throughout. In this (re)ordering, war-like feminism and scholarly soldiering take their place at the top of the pyramid of power, and power is exercised via ‘manly’ imperial grunts, working-class white women and local proxies on the bottom of the pyramid, the layer of conquered men and women, their bodies subjected to violence and surveillance, and their lives re-engineered to suit urban counterinsurgencies, pacifications and population control.

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\* SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, UK.

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## CHAPTER 36

# Reading Between the Lines: Sexual Politics and Publishing in the Age of Public Diplomacy

*Vron Ware\**

One of the more significant aspects of Lubna Hussein's defiance of the Sudanese government in 2009 was the attention the case received worldwide, from political leaders to a wide range of media commentators. The question of women's clothing – or rather the prohibitions surrounding what women are allowed to wear or not wear – is a familiar, though powerful, signifier of the underlying differences between those cultures judged to be mired in 'tradition' and those which have embraced 'modernity'. At the heart of this insidious 'culture talk' there is a consistent emphasis on sexuality and women's rights which become the measure of how 'advanced' or 'backward' a society might be.<sup>1</sup> Although there are complex issues relating to the situation within Sudan, not least an authoritarian government as well as the contested geopolitics of Darfur, the threat of punishment by flogging for the crime of wearing trousers provided one more beacon for those eager to prove the 'barbarity' of Islamic cultures. This becomes even more significant as culture itself is increasingly established as a medium of engagement between foreign governments, media corporations and global publics.

This chapter explores some feminist perspectives on culture as an integral element of public diplomacy, alert to the ways in which the circulation of ideas about gender, sexuality and Islamic cultures is an important aspect of contemporary international relations. The historical precedents of emphasizing women's subordination as a justification for colonial intervention are by now well known, but it is worth recalling Fanon's analysis of the colonizers' attitude towards the veil in the context

of their desire to destroy the structure of Algerian society. In 'Algeria Unveiled', he wrote that the occupation forces mobilized their 'most powerful and varied resources' first to explain and document the situation of women, and then to rescue them from the domination of their menfolk.<sup>2</sup>

This strategy of targeting women was not new in itself. It was in fact entirely in keeping with the way that European colonizers, including feminists, regularly condemned indigenous practices that were deemed barbaric towards women and antithetical to Christian standards. However, what made Fanon's analysis more profound was his naming of the sheer array of forces focused on gender relations, starting with the collusion of researchers and local administrators. Once women's emancipation had been identified as an appropriate rationale for intervention, a whole new structure of operations came into effect:

Mutual aid societies and societies to promote solidarity with Algerian women sprung up in great number...This was a period of effervescence, of putting into application a whole technique of infiltration, in the course of which droves of social workers and women directing charitable works descended on the Arab quarters.<sup>3</sup>

Fanon's analysis, though now outdated in many ways, is important for two reasons. First, it offered directions for subsequent feminist and post-colonial critiques of imperialism in the second half of the twentieth century. This scholarship was useful in challenging the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan which, from the very start, was inextricably linked to a programme of liberating women from Islamic fundamentalism in the name of 'Enduring Freedom'. However, Fanon also recognized that the colonial project entailed a convergence of academic ('scientific'), political, military, governmental and ostensibly humanitarian forces directed at liberating Algerian women from 'medieval' customs. His ability to see the connection between a range of interventions ostensibly in women's interests needs to be appreciated as feminists scrutinize contemporary global security policies, from counterinsurgency and military occupation to operations classified as humanitarian aid, reconstruction or development. In this chapter, I am specifically interested in the emergence of a new field of international relations known as Public Diplomacy (PD).

## **The power of influence**

Public Diplomacy is widely referred to as ‘the influence business’<sup>4</sup> or ‘all that a nation does to explain itself to the world’.<sup>5</sup> The term encapsulates the highly complex management of relationships between countries, regions and political blocs determined by the changing framework of world politics, not just after the end of the Cold War but in the volatile period after 9/11. Increasingly these dynamics are also influenced by the revolution in communication technologies (including satellite broadcasting). Although this varies from one country to another, the fact that governments are now competing with privately owned and corporate media conglomerations indicates how far they have ceded control of the flow of ideas and cultural expression.

Far from abandoning efforts to influence selected publics abroad, however, the PD strategies employed to represent national security interests have become ever more diffuse. Agencies involved in PD now include NGOs, tourism organizations, creative industries, language teaching, translation and other forms of inter-cultural relations. In a paper analysing the wide spectrum of diplomacy work in the UK, Ali Fisher suggests that the range of official and unofficial activities interact along a line that runs from ‘listening’ to ‘telling’, or as the diplomatic jargon would have it, ‘direct messaging’.<sup>6</sup>

The term ‘propaganda’, understood as persuasive information targeted at particular audiences, has a particular history within European statecraft. It was notably used by the British during the 1914–18 war to expound the prospect of the ‘clash of civilizations’ between Atlantic enlightenment and Prussian barbarism. It subsequently became associated with the work of Edward Bernays, nephew of Sigmund Freud and reputedly ‘the father of spin’, who proposed that propaganda was essential in averting chaos: ‘The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society.’<sup>7</sup>

By the 1930s, some European governments, notably Italy and Germany, were employing culturalist arguments, shaped by fascist ideologies, to assert their respective contributions to civilization.<sup>8</sup> However, the United States did not engage significantly in this sphere of foreign policy until the Cold War. At the start of the twenty-first century the phrase ‘cultural diplomacy’ re-emerged as an adjunct of foreign policy, often mistakenly confused with the term ‘soft power’, a concept first proposed by Joseph

Nye to describe non-military or non-coercive methods of persuasion and co-option.<sup>9</sup> During the Bush administration, cultural diplomacy was officially defined as the exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding. This approach not only belies the promotion of cultural exchange as a corollary to the threat of force, it also demonstrates the heavy-handed, ‘messaging’ approach to managing cultural relations.<sup>10</sup> In 2005, for instance, a government report declared cultural diplomacy to be an effective means to ‘demonstrate our values, and our interest in values, and combat the popular notion that Americans are shallow, violent and godless’.<sup>11</sup> In 2009, President Obama dismantled the office of public diplomacy and gave his first official interview to the Arab television station *al-arabiya*, emphasizing that ‘the United States has a stake in the well-being of the Muslim world’.<sup>12</sup> Within a few months the State Department appointed Farah Pandith as special envoy, responsible for helping US efforts to ‘engage with Muslims around the world on a people-to-people and organizational level’.<sup>13</sup> Secretary of State Hillary Clinton further defined the new diplomatic strategies in the Middle East when she employed the term ‘smart power’ early in her appointment:

We must use what has been called smart power – the full range of tools at our disposal – diplomatic, economic, military, political, legal, and cultural – picking the right tool, or combination of tools, for each situation. With smart power, diplomacy will be the vanguard of foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

Clinton has subsequently shown herself to be eager to exploit the opportunities created by the new media environment, reliant on a younger generation of advisers such as Jared Cohen, author of *Children of Jihad* (2007).<sup>15</sup> In this travelogue, Cohen argued that young people from Lebanon to Iran were using internet-based technology and mobile phones in comparable ways to their peers in the USA – a particularly significant point given that 70 per cent of the population in the region are under 30. His book concludes: ‘They are the ones who can be reached by breaking down the traditional means of communication and speaking a language so that this generation everywhere can communicate their hopes and ideals’.<sup>16</sup> Cohen was subsequently appointed to the US government in the Office of Policy Planning, where he was given responsibility for counter-radicalization, youth and education, public diplomacy, Muslim world outreach and North

Africa. In this role he represents one of the most consistent voices urging the US government to target young people through the digital environment.

Unlike previous diplomatic initiatives, however, Cohen's version emphasizes that communication must not simply represent the interests of American youth. He argues that the new tools are invaluable to US diplomacy because they facilitate young people living with oppressive regimes to challenge laws and values. In one post he wrote:

In Saudi Arabia, for example, women are using online social networks to petition for driving rights and are uploading onto YouTube videos of themselves driving in the rural areas. In Egypt, young people are using Facebook to stand up for their political rights and organize nationwide strikes.<sup>17</sup>

The use of Twitter to coordinate mass protests in Iran after the election in June illustrate that digital technology has become a routine communicative strategy – although not without its dangers – among all those who have access to mobile phones.<sup>18</sup> However, Cohen is not just celebrating the liberatory potential of social media. He urges that 'we need to recognize the prescriptive value this has for winning the hearts and minds of youth around the world'.<sup>19</sup>

## **The written word**

The designation of Beirut as the 2009 UNESCO World Book capital <sup>20</sup> was made in agreement with international bookselling and publishing organizations, and intended to promote a range of cultural initiatives within the country. Rather than evaluating this particular initiative, however, I want to situate it within the wider context of inter-cultural relations and PD, using a feminist perspective to explore some of the forces that bring national or regional literatures into view. Here I use one particular book to sketch out why the promotion of reading literature by and about Muslim women in translation demands feminist critique as an aspect of international relations.

Fanon would have been well aware that since the publication of *The Arabian Nights*, novels, memoirs, travel writing and other forms of cultural production emerging from Europe and the USA were obsessed with describing sexual practices and gender relations within Islamic cultures.<sup>21</sup> In recent times, popular titles such as *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind*

*the Veil in Saudi Arabia*,<sup>22</sup> the international bestseller by Jean Sasson first published in 1993, *The Bookseller of Kabul*<sup>23</sup> by Norwegian war reporter Åsne Seierstad (2003), *Reading Lolita in Teheran*<sup>24</sup> by Azar Nafisi (2003), and *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia*<sup>25</sup> by Carmen bin Ladin (2005), all of which featured heavily veiled women on their front covers, indicate an obsessive interest in the experiences of Muslim women as victims of harsh, often barbaric, patriarchal customs. Although the commercial success of these type of books cannot be attributed to government agencies such as the CIA, their resilience provides an index of how far the interests of the global publishing industry have merged with the official business of national security.<sup>26</sup>

A more controversial example is provided by US writer Sherry Jones' fictional account of the life of Aisha, one of the wives of the prophet Mohammed. Jones' novel *The Jewel of Medina*<sup>27</sup> was originally due for publication by Random House in 2008, but after the intervention of Denise Spellberg, a professor of history and Middle Eastern studies at the University of Texas, the contract was cancelled for fear of provoking a backlash among Muslims worldwide. Despite the controversy, it has subsequently been published in several languages, including English.<sup>28</sup>

Since 2001 there has been a significant investment of resources aimed at remedying the lack of translation between English and Arabic literature, a development which demands analysis in the context of PD. But since the 'war on terror' has made it almost impossible to approach modern Arabic literature outside the tentacles of geopolitical power, it is essential for critical readers to become literate about the processes that bring particular texts and authors to the attention of commercial reading publics.

In April 2008, the London Book Fair garnered an unusual amount of publicity due to its special focus on Arabic literature. Throughout the week of the Fair, a predominantly commercial annual event, the British Council organized a series of seminars on different aspects of contemporary publishing and literary trends in the Arabic-speaking world which brought together established writers, whose work was relatively unknown in English, with potential publishers and translators as well as new readers. The converging interests of the publishing industry and international relations were clearly spelled out in publicity advertising the discussions, interviews and readings that took place throughout the week.<sup>29</sup>

Author and journalist Ahdah Soueif noted that the choice of Arab Literature as the Fair's market focus, thanks to three years of planning by the British Council, could 'be read – and praised – as an effort to check the slippage back into the bad old days when the Arab world served merely as a locus for western imaginings, self-invention and ambition'. Reflecting on the significance of the cultural aspects of the fair, she wrote: 'The counterpoint to the ongoing wars of aggression and the drumbeat heralding a "clash of civilisations" is the desire of ordinary people in the west and in the Arab world to engage with each other.'<sup>30</sup>

One of the authors invited to speak at the seminars was Raja Alsanea, whose debut novel *Girls of Riyadh* (*Banat al Riyadh*) was translated into English and published by Penguin in the USA (2007) and the UK (2008). First published in Arabic in 2005, it rapidly became a best-seller; it was reprinted seven times in two years in Arabic, has been translated into more than 20 languages, and hit best-seller lists in Lebanon, Bahrain, Kuwait, Italy and Germany.

## **Pre-modern sexuality**

Marketed as the authentic voice of Saudi youth, adept at manoeuvring within and outside the local norms, the British edition of the novel *Girls of Riyadh* provides a useful starting point for examining how this book has been positioned to attract a particular demographic readership. It boasts a striking pink and purple cover dotted with handbags, hookahs, fast cars and stilettos, alerting readers to its genre and subject matter. The phrase 'sex and the city' also appears on the cover and the analogy is picked up in all full-length reviews.<sup>31</sup> But it is not just the themes of hyper-femininity and hedonism identifying the book as routine 'Chick Lit' that are suggestive. The jacket is also covered with pithy extracts from reviews that spell out a slightly different but potentially titillating recipe of seclusion and secrecy.<sup>32</sup>

Sandwiched between the laudatory quotes from reviews, the marketing blurb on the back of the novel's cover alerts potential readers to another dichotomy designed to entice. It manages to suggest that the girls of Riyadh are bound by the country's strict cultural traditions and 'trying to be good little Muslim girls' by pleasing their families and their men, while at the same time, dating, shopping, watching American TV, having fun and, more significantly, 'sneaking out behind their parents' backs'. It ends with the

question, printed as a single line after this descriptive paragraph, ‘But can you be a twenty-first-century girl *and* a Saudi girl?’.<sup>33</sup> As Judith Butler has argued recently, the question of sexual politics lies at the heart of the serious political contestation about ‘who has arrived in modernity and who has not?’.<sup>34</sup> While the notoriety of *Girls of Riyadh* is based on its effective challenge to notions of female passivity and ‘traditional’ customs in what many outsiders perceive to be a pre-modern society, its power to influence perceptions of contemporary youth culture among wealthy young Saudis is tempered by the weight of expectations that greeted it.

Butler continues:

... very often claims to new or radical sexual freedoms are appropriated precisely by that point of view – usually enunciated from within state power – that would try to define Europe and the sphere of modernity as the privileged site where sexual radicalism can and does take place.<sup>35</sup>

Read in this light, the implication that a modern Saudi girl cannot exist in the twenty-first century is deeply troubling, even though it is intended as a provocation.

Where Butler deconstructs the Orientalist temporality of sexual repression and cultural backwardness found in anti-immigrant discourse, particularly in Europe, feminist responses to literature by and about women in Islamic cultures have begun to pay attention to pedagogy as an important space for reflection and resistance. Introducing her essay on ‘Reading desire: from empathy to estrangement, from enlightenment to implication’, Lisa Taylor writes:

For those of us who turn to literature education to create spaces of sustained critical embodied reflection, there is a particular challenge to think through the kinds of reading practices which might intervene into the dual economies of antipathy and desire animating Orientalism in the age of Empire (Sharma & Sharma, 2003) and manifesting in the increasingly enthusiastic Western reception of ‘Third World’ and Muslim women authors (Amireh & Majaj, 2000).<sup>36</sup>

Theorizing ‘reading practices’ also draws attention to the proliferation of women’s book clubs which have helped promote international best-selling titles such as *The Kite Runner* and *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by the Afghan-American author Khaled Hosseini. Women readers are frequently targeted as prime consumers of contemporary literature in translation. In her essay on the politics of reception, entitled ‘Reading Lolita in times of war’, Catherine Burwell demands that we address the question why so-called ‘international’ novels and biographies are aggressively marketed towards



women, especially through the medium of book clubs instigated by the publishers themselves.<sup>37</sup>

## Diplomatic channels

The prospect of being a cultural ambassador can raise urgent questions for contemporary writers like Alsanea who find themselves selected as worthy candidates for publishing, distribution and publicity. Alsanea, only 24 years old when her book was published, confronted these issues of representation head on in a preface to the English edition:

the success of my book in the Arab world was enough to mark me as a member of Arab intellectual society, which seemed to come with certain responsibilities. Furthermore, coming from a family that values other cultures and nations, and being the proud Saudi I am, I felt it was my duty to reveal another side of Saudi life to the Western world.<sup>38</sup>

We have seen how *Girls of Riyadh* was marketed as a text that might inform readers outside the region as well as entertaining them. The question of whether it plays to cultural stereotypes or challenges them remains open, but Alsanea states explicitly that her Saudi heritage obliged her to embrace the opportunity to reach a wider audience, particularly because of prevailing images of KSA in the West. In her preface she writes:

It never occurred to me, when I wrote my novel, that I would be releasing it in any language other than Arabic. I did not think the Western world would actually be interested. It seemed to me, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of the Arabian Nights... or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists.<sup>39</sup>

Perhaps the most telling consequence of the burden that the young author finds herself carrying is conveyed in her attempt, by means of the preface, to direct her Anglophone readers towards a particular interpretation of her book. The characters are not representative of all of the girls of Riyadh, she claims, but they do represent many of them. Social mores in the Kingdom are very conservative, admittedly, which makes the lives of young women very different from their counterparts in the West, but there are universal elements at work too: 'women there... are full of homes and plans and determination and dreams. And they fall in and out of love just like women anywhere else'.<sup>40</sup> A bitter dispute with her original translator, feminist author Marilyn Booth, evokes some of the problems entailed in translating creative writing without losing 'vital threads from the original fabric'.<sup>41</sup>

In an article about the significance of the concept of ‘world literature’, Pankaj Mishra points out that once a literary text has been identified as a potential best-seller, it acquires a life of its own regardless of the author’s dreams: ‘The success of a book as a commercial product is contingent on a whole lot of things its author never thought of: the vagaries of domestic and international markets, changing cultural fashions, not to mention geopolitical shifts.’<sup>42</sup> Using the example of *Girls of Riyadh*, I have tried to suggest reasons why tales of young Muslim women retain such prestige in global publishing circuits. The fact that geopolitical shifts have resulted in massive resources aimed at increasing the translation of texts between English and Arabic can only be a positive development. However, the convergence of governmental and corporate power in the terrain of global culture indicates that international best-sellers cannot be read outside the contemporary ‘frames of war’.<sup>43</sup>

## Notes

\* The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.

1. Mahmood Mamdani (ed.) (2000), *Beyond Rights Talk and Culture Talk* (New York, NY: St Martin’s Press).

2. Frantz Fanon (1959), *Studies in a Dying Colonialism* (London: Earthscan, 1989), p. 37.

3. Ibid., p. 38.

4. Ali Fisher and Aurélie Bröckerhoff (2008), *Options for Influence: Global Campaigns of Persuasion in the New Worlds of Public Diplomacy* (London: Counterpoint).

5. Cynthia P. Schneider (2007), ‘Culture communicates: US diplomacy that works’, in Jan Melissen (ed.), *The New Public Diplomacy: Soft Power in International Relations* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), p. 147.

6. Fisher and Bröckerhoff, *Options for Influence*.

7. Edward Bernays (1928), *Propaganda* (New York, NY: Horace Liveright), p. 37.

8. The British, alarmed that this threatened their geopolitics interests in the East and in South America, accepted the need for a cultural element in their own foreign policy, particularly if it offered a means to promote the empire as a symbol of democracy and liberty. The British Council was founded in the mid-1930s, amid arguments that the country should refrain from ‘propaganda wars’, and follow the French example by influencing cultural institutions on the ground. It was well known that the French had long subsidized schools and universities in North Africa and the Near East as well as hospitals and agricultural institutions.

9. Joseph S. Nye (2004), *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (Cambridge MA: Perseus Publishing); and Schneider, ‘Culture communicates’.

10. For example, in 2005, Karen Hughes, one of Bush’s closest personal advisors, was appointed as the Undersecretary of State Responsible for Public Diplomacy, an ill-fated department operated largely by women. Along with Laura Bush, she was a founding member of the United States Afghan Women’s Council (USAWC), which was set up in 2002 as an adjunct to military operations in Afghanistan. Hughes’ mission consisted largely of educational exchanges and schemes to send cultural envoys and ambassadors round the world, lecturing foreign audiences on subjects ranging

from public health to exhorting the benefits of US-style democracy. In one example, Hughes addressed an audience of 500 women in Saudi Arabia, where she expressed the hope that Saudi women would be able to drive and 'fully participate in society' much as they do in her country. One woman responded: 'The general image of the Arab woman is that she isn't happy. Well, we're all pretty happy' (Vron Ware (2006), 'Info-war and the politics of feminist curiosity: exploring new frameworks for feminist intercultural studies', *Cultural Studies*, 20(6), pp. 526–51); Steven Weisman (2005), 'Saudi Women Have Message for US Envoy', *New York Times*, 28 September, Section A, p. 1.

11. U.S. Department of State (2005), 'Cultural Diplomacy: the Lynchpin of Public Diplomacy', Report of the Advisory Committee on Cultural Diplomacy, p. 3.

12. Stephen R. Grand and Kristin M. Lord (2009), 'To rebuild U.S.–Muslim world relations, Obama is not enough', *Huffington Post*, 26 March, available at [www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0326\\_muslim\\_world\\_relations\\_grand.aspx](http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2009/0326_muslim_world_relations_grand.aspx), accessed 30 July 2013; Nancy Snow (2009), *Persuader-in-Chief: Global Opinion and Public Diplomacy in the Age of Obama* (Ann Arbor, MI: Nimble Books).

13. al-Jazeera (2009), 'US appoints envoy to Muslim world', 27 June, available at <http://english.aljazeera.net/news/americas/2009/06/200962742517747346.html>, accessed 30 July 2013.

14. CBS News (2009), 'Clinton: use "smart power" in diplomacy', 18 June, available at [www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/13/politics/main4718044.shtml](http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2009/01/13/politics/main4718044.shtml), accessed 30 July 2013.

15. Jared Cohen (2007), *Children of Jihad: A Young American's Travels Among the Youth of the Middle East* (New York, NY: Gotham Books).

16. *Ibid.*, p. 274.

17. Jared Cohen (2008), 'Digital age has ushered in an opportunity for unprecedented global collaboration', 17 December, available at [www.huffingtonpost.com/jared-cohen/digital-age-has-ushered-i\\_b\\_151698.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jared-cohen/digital-age-has-ushered-i_b_151698.html), accessed 30 July 2013.

18. Fereshteh Nourai-Simone (2005), *On Shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the Global Era* (New York, NY: Feminist Press).

19. Cohen, 'Digital age has ushered in an opportunity for unprecedented global collaboration'.

20. Each year, UNESCO and the three international associations of professionals of the book sector (International Publishers Association (IPA), International Booksellers Federation (IBF) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)) select a World Book Capital City for a period of one year, from one World Book and Copyright Day (23 April) to the next.

21. Derek Hopwood (1999), *Sexual Encounters in the Middle East: The British, the French and the Arabs* (Reading: Ithaca Press). However, a more precise example of the recent use of academic fieldwork by political power is provided by the book *The Arab Mind* by anthropologist Raphael Patai, first published in 1976 and reissued in 2002. An introduction to the recent edition by retired US army colonel Norvell B. DeAtkine, who worked with Psychological Operations in Iraq in 2003, cements the conviction held by neo-imperialists that Arab culture was knowable across a range of different regional and national space, and that any attempt to intervene in the politics of the region had to reckon with the mindset of 'the Arab' in order to be successful. The book covered every aspect of social life and culture, including Arab child-rearing practice and 'The Realm of Sex'. Although Patai takes pains to emphasize the wide variation of practices within the Arab world, he is able to generalize authoritatively with sentences such as: 'Local and individual variations aside, the general situation in the Arab family is that it is the father who is severe, stern, and authoritarian, while the mother is, by contrast, loving and compassionate'. Raphael Patai (1976), *The Arab Mind* (New York: Hatherleigh Press, 2002), p. 27.

22. Jean Sasson (1994), *Princess: a true story of life behind the veil in Saudi Arabia* (London: Bantam Press/Ted Smart).

23. Åsne Seierstad (2003), *The Bookseller of Kabul* (London: Virago).

24. Azar Nafisi (2004), *Reading Lolita in Teheran* (New York: Fourth Estate).
25. Carmen bin Ladin (2005), *Inside the Kingdom: My Life in Saudi Arabia* (New York: Warner Books).
26. Jasmin Zine, Lisa K. Taylor and Hilary E. Davis (2007), 'Reading Muslim women and Muslim women reading back: transnational feminist reading practices, pedagogy and ethnical concerns', *Intercultural Education*, 18(4), pp. 271–80. Ware, 'Info-war and the politics of feminist curiosity'. Vron Ware (2011), 'The new literary front: public diplomacy and the cultural politics of reading Arab fiction in translation', *New Formations*, 73, pp. 100–21.
27. Sherry Jones (2008), *The Jewel of Medina* (New York: Beaufort Books).
28. Spellberg, who was shown galleys of the unpublished book, decided to alert a number of contacts after becoming alarmed that the book was likely to be highly provocative and inflammatory to Muslims worldwide. Jones' novel was eventually published by the US-based Beaufort Books after the home of the British publisher, Gibson Square, was firebombed and three suspects were charged. By the end of the year the book had been published without further protest in Serbia, Germany, Denmark, Italy and the USA, with plans for publication in a number of other countries.
29. Amr Moussa, speaking in his capacity as secretary-general of the Arab League, welcomed the fact that events such as the London Fair could 'enlarge understanding and contribute to dialogue between nations', as well as correct the 'stereotypical picture of Arabs and Muslims' that has sometimes circulated in Western countries; David Tresilian (2008), 'The fun of the fair', *al-Ahram Weekly*, 24–30 April, available at <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/894/cu21.htm>, accessed 30 July 2013.
30. Ahdaf Soueif et al. (2008) 'One thousand and one delights', *Guardian*, review, 12 April, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/12/publishing.society](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2008/apr/12/publishing.society), accessed 30 July 2013.
31. 'Rajaa Alsanea's Saudi take on *Sex and the City* is an irresistible and thought-provoking confection. This cheeky and salacious portrait of the loves and lives of four privileged twenty-something girls in Riyadh, banned on publication in Saudi Arabia in 2005, has become a controversial best seller across the Middle East'; Alev Adil (2007), 'Funny and chilling: sex in the Saudi city', *Independent*, 3 August, available at [www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/girls-of-riyadh-by-rajaa-alsanea-trans-marilyn-booth-460023.html](http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/girls-of-riyadh-by-rajaa-alsanea-trans-marilyn-booth-460023.html), accessed 30 July 2013.
32. The novel received widely enthusiastic reviews, describing it as a revealing study of one of the world's most secretive societies; an explosive take on Western preoccupations of life in one of Islam's most repressive societies; and a book that revealed more about one of the world's oddest and most closed societies than a library of books.
33. Raja Alsanea (2008), *Girls of Riyadh*, translated by Marilyn Booth (London: Penguin); emphasis in original.
34. Judith Butler (2009), *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso), p. 102.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 102.
36. Lisa K. Taylor (2007), 'Reading desire: from empathy to estrangement, from enlightenment to implication', *Intercultural Education*, 18(4), p. 298.
37. Catherine Burwell (2007), 'Reading Lolita in times of war: women's book clubs and the politics of reception', *Intercultural Education*, 18(4), p. 286. A prime example is provided by a website set up by Random House (UK) in 2009 to encourage an 'online book community'. One of the first recommended titles featured on the new site was *The Consequences of Love* by Sulaiman Addonia, described as a compelling love story set in Jeddah.
38. Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p. vii.
39. *Ibid.*
40. *Ibid.*, p. viii.
41. Booth has written about this dispute at some length. 'If English-reading audiences are led to expect that they need not engage with other cultures on those cultures' own terms (for example, in

*Banat al-Riyadh*, the ways Saudi youth verbalize global consumer culture in a local idiom), they will remain in their own comfortably isolated cultural easy chairs, unaware of the rich cultural specificities, political nuances, and beautifully jolting reading experiences passing them by'; Marilyn Booth (2008), 'Where is the Translator's Voice?' *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 15–21 May, Issue 897, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2008/897/cu2.htm>, accessed 30 July 2013.

42. Pankaj Mishra (2009), 'Author, author: the world of "world" literature', *Guardian*, 18 April, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/18/literary-cosmopolitanism-global-literature](http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/apr/18/literary-cosmopolitanism-global-literature), accessed 30 July 2013.

43. Butler, *Frames of War*.

## Further reading

Snow, Nancy (2003), *Information War: American Propaganda, Free Speech and Opinion Control Since 9/11* (New York, NY: Seven Sisters Books).

——— (2009), *Persuader-in-Chief: Global Opinion and Public Diplomacy in the Age of Obama* (Ann Arbor, MI: Nimble Books).

Whitaker, Brian (2006), 'Victory for the Riyadh girls', *Guardian*, 9 October, available at [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/09/victoryfortheriyadgirls](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2006/oct/09/victoryfortheriyadgirls), accessed 30 July 2013.

## CHAPTER 37

### The Blind Traditional Subject and Suitcase Patriarchies

*Kumkum Sangari\**

The co-constitution of nation spaces as well as imperial and subordinate economies is obscured by the increasing drive for cultural alterity. Neoliberal agendas and recuperated colonial imaginaries are spliced with the selective appropriation and rephrasing of women's issues to disband feminist projects. State, academic, media, development, donor and even human rights discourses manufacture cultural patents on which specific 'cultures' are said to have sole purchase. Thus the term 'culture' now conflates 'civilizations', traditions, religions and patriarchies. However, religio-cultural coding as of 'honour killings' as 'Muslim', or '*sati*' (widow immolation) as 'Hindu' in South Asia, breaks down in practice since caste council mandates work like community condoned *fatwas*, honour killings cut across religions, and widow immolation gets its techniques and permissions from the full spectrum of invented or adopted traditions, domestic and public violence, the state apparatus, local elites, communal organizations and religious institutions. The mutation of acts of gendered violence into cultural patents decontextualizes them, turns them into a wedge for international intervention, complicates feminist critiques of violent practices, and positions feminists yet again as anti-national, anti-religion or anti-community.

Culture is the place of allegation, ascription and explanation, and performs controlling functions in the neoliberal conjuncture. This reoriented culturalism hides its own political investments, works within the tradition/modernity framework, and describes patriarchal violence as resting on tradition.<sup>1</sup> In other words, it produces what I term the blind

traditional subject. The production of insulated ‘traditions’ from both settled populations and migrants strips their economic and political coordinates: the blind traditional subject (whether in widow immolation, honour killing or forced marriage) seems to need or acquire only cultural and religious anchorage or sustenance. The economic and political become by default the domain of the ‘modern’ – a modern either inhabited by perverse local feminists and secularists or the IMF and World Bank. This suppresses the fact that nation spaces are (and were) not insulated sites for the production of tradition or culture. The deterministic invocation of tradition/culture blurs the sharpening or contouring of region-specific gendered violence by the contradictions within a wider transnational political economy.

Counterpointing marriage-centred acts of violence in India with the recent propagation of choice marriage by the British state is instructive, and may disclose the implication of marriage in uneven and combined development as well as the transnational reformulation of patriarchies.

In India, the increasing repression and violent truncation of intracaste, intercaste or interreligious marriages of choice in the self-serving names of tradition or honour, alongside the multiple obdurances of the state, speaks not of a battle between tradition and modernity, but of local (often Hindu right-wing) centres of power and non-statutory jurisdiction, a collusive state apparatus, an extractive market-led state which at once acts on behalf of familial patriarchalism and abets a belligerent market economy, generates competing inequalities at every level (local, regional, national, transnational), and is encircled by international economic conditionalities and legal instruments. This is the context of the adoption, expansion and spread of what are perceived as old or feudal customs and traditions in India, and, with discrete features, Pakistan and Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Ironically, imposition and alibi, ideological ascription and self-definition can coincide.

In Britain (as well as Western Europe), domestic violence (renamed ‘honour killing’) and forced marriage – that extend somewhat ambiguously into ‘consent’ marriage contracted transnationally by immigrant families – are posed as culturalist issues. Though now evidently entwined with anti-immigrant policies, state control of immigrant marriage, racist assimilationism and paternalist rescue narratives, choice marriage has come to exemplify the modern. The British state simultaneously proclaims a universalist system of classification of marriage and demarcates separate

and incommensurate worlds. The statist capture of a long-standing feminist demand of the right to choice marriage can trap South Asian feminists in the equally vexed positions of either allying with the state (all 'British' women should be the same) or trying to normalize arranged marriage (a plea for conserving cultural difference).

This process has several consequences. The exclusive emphasis on choice displaces earlier feminist critiques of the institution of marriage. The act of choice serves to 'save' marriage and negate or obscure the transactional and contractual nature of the institution. Does hetero-normative marriage need to be saved under the insignia of choice and national belonging because it is already a precarious institution, or to fill the deficit of public care left by a receding welfare state, or to assuage racist demographic anxieties in Britain? At any rate, a market-led patriarchy forecloses questions about the material and ideological determination of choice. The immigrant family is demonized as a controlling institution (which it can be) without seeing why immigrants tend to consolidate patriarchal communities as the means for their own reproduction in subtly or blatantly racist milieus. Even as the British state favours choice marriage, it insists that the foreign spouses 'chosen' by immigrants must know English, and immigration control policies reduce the commitment to family reunification: affect (love?) is invoked for only linguistically homogenous choice marriage and not for the immigrant family. The state continues, anachronistically, to construe immigration as 'emancipatory', thus making choice marriage the veiling ideology of the disembedding that accompanies not only its own history of labour importation, but also economic migration in care work, domestic and other service sectors. The attempt to return marriage to an affective economy (underwritten by unwaged labour and care work) not only severs it from feminist critiques, feeds it into the apparent libertarianism of market ideologies and an exclusionary 'national' assimilationism, but also dresses up an interventionist state as a benign paterfamilias committed to eradicating patriarchies – as alien life forms nurtured elsewhere!

Is there some relation between choice and choiceless marriage, between the national solidarities supposedly generated by affective marriage and hetero-normative marriage as a servicing institution embedded in both domestic and transnational patriarchal economies? The affective turn of the British state implies a critique of 'traditional' patriarchal authority even as



capitalism continues to profit from patriarchal governance that produces both cheap(ened) female labour and ‘docile’ subjects among immigrant populations in Britain and Europe, as well as in ‘other’ nation spaces. Thus in India or Bangladesh the British state and corporate investors/outsourcers are direct beneficiaries of governed female labour. This suggests that the emancipatory effects of modernity must not only be distributed unevenly in different ‘worlds’, but that these different distributions are *precisely* what constitute a global economic order of combined and uneven development.

Contemporary capitalism destabilizes marriage/family in the interests of labour mobility but it cannot dispense with familial patriarchal ideologies: it perpetuates and reconfigures the link between hetero-normative marriage, reproduction and women’s waged labour. Patriarchal systems are *not* synonymous with culture, religion or tradition, but imbricated in the same economy of capital and structurally related to *other* systems of inequality: they are part of existing labour conditions, reformulated in the creation of new ones, and crucial to a systemic control of female labour that must rely on violence. In the past decade, in India, the selective tightening in domestic gendered and religious regimes alongside transnational dilutions seem to be a correlate of the neoliberal economic order that depends on both active consumers and a docile labour force – that is, consumption generated by ‘individual’ needs and labour governed by patriarchal etiquettes. The terms ‘modernity’ and the ‘West’ cannot grasp the unevenness or contradictions of the economic and social relations of capitalism.

Yet in the new regime of capital where some developing countries are crucial to sustaining a regime of accumulation,<sup>3</sup> provision of Euro-American lifestyles at the cost of their own people and reserves (such as India or China), replicate extractive relations internally, cede economic territory (natural resources, markets, labour, environment), and are broker states that make nation spaces safe for transnational capital and corporate extraction, to what extent should we continue to think of patriarchies as entirely region or nation specific? If patriarchies constitute the given and mutating social field that facilitates the functioning of neoliberal capitalism, can they be segregated from the globalized economy? The two images compressed in the blind traditional subject – one who carries patriarchal practices in a suitcase to Europe or one who lives in their ancestral homeland mired in old habits – are both false. Not only are seemingly old

patriarchal practices being produced and renovated on the fraught ground of resident/ immigrant interactions inside Britain (or Europe), but also within India through the generation of differential citizenships with graded entitlements and the deepening of structural violence. The conditions for structural violence can be engendered transnationally even as its instantiation in acts of gendered violence may occur at home.

I have written elsewhere on multiple patriarchies that have different histories of emergence, are relational, and subject to constant reconstitution.<sup>4</sup> The pluralized term ‘multiple patriarchies’ has the advantage of giving access to the historical specificity of both European and non-European societies, of mapping similarities and differences in women’s oppression in terms of class, caste and region within and across nation spaces, and seeing them in dialectical fashion as relations of overlap, confluence, interdependent difference or divergence. Here I want to add that the co-constitution of patriarchies began with colonization and now has new coordinates in consolidating transnational regimes. The concept of multiple patriarchies may help to navigate the complex and formative conjunctions of familial, state-induced, market-led, caste and religious community-governed patriarchies.

The double positioning of nation states as points of entry for global capital and internal extraction that need both governed labour and individuated consumption, the transnational economy that draws women into waged work without releasing the vast majority from unwaged/care work, and the alignments and disjunctions between multiple patriarchies are the material terrain of feminist critique. This is also the terrain from which common preoccupations or concerns and feminist solidarities emerge across nation spaces.

## Notes

\* University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

1. See, for instance, the Statement of the General Assembly of UN (2000), cited in Radhika Coomaraswamy (2004), ‘Identity within: cultural relativism, minority rights’, in Aameena Hussain (ed.), *Race: Identity, Caste and Conflict in the South Asian Context* (Colombo: ICES), p. 33.

2. See Kumkum Sangari (2008), ‘Gendered violence, national boundaries and culture’, in Radhika Coomaraswamy and Nimanthy Perera-Rajasingham (eds), *Constellations of Violence: Feminist interventions in South Asia* (Delhi: Women Unlimited).

3. I owe this insight to C.P. Chandrasekhar.

4. For a theorization of multiple patriarchies, see Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989), 'Introduction', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women* (New Delhi: Kali for Women), p. 5; Kumkum Sangari (1995), 'The politics of diversity: religious communities and multiple patriarchies', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 30(51–2); Kumkum Sangari (2007), 'Shaping pressures and symbolic horizons: the women's movement in India', in Neloufer de Mel and Selvy Thiruchandran (eds), *At the Cutting Edge: Essays in Honour of Kumari Jayawardene* (Delhi: Women Unlimited).

## CHAPTER 38

### Black Feminism and the World

*Hazel Carby\**

I wish to sketch the trajectory of black feminism as it emerged in the UK and USA to consider what it can teach us about the present and organizing for a feminist future. Black feminism has its roots in movements for emancipation and liberation: anti-slavery and anti-colonial. I write here in broad generalities and from my experience as a black British woman who is involved in black feminist movements on both sides of the Atlantic, but I do not pretend to represent all black feminists who speak in multiple voices.

Black feminism in the USA has its roots in the struggle against enslavement articulated, in its written form, primarily through documents of the anti-slavery movement. It also existed, however, in the everyday practices of resistance to the brutal exploitation of the black female body in the reproduction of property.

After the American Civil War, black feminist critique develops from the contentious debate that split apart the alliance formed in the anti-slavery movement as white female leaders of the emerging women's movement organized against granting the vote to black men in favour of their gaining the franchise themselves. By the turn of the century, black feminist liberation politics produced a sophisticated theorization of the racialized sex-gender system of the USA in an anti-lynching campaign and in opposition to the brutal suppression of the black vote.<sup>1</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, black women's feminism was dominated by the middle-class politics of uplift, though a small group of black feminists joined the Communist Party and were active in a variety of labour, cultural and organizing struggles in urban and rural areas, north and south.

Younger generations of black women articulated their opposition to being told that their position in the Civil Rights Movement was subordinate to men through a radical black feminist politics that in turn influenced the flowering of creative writers and black women who enter the academy as historians, literary critics and theorists. It is this generation of women who recover the history of the black feminists who preceded them.

Black British feminism was by necessity transnational: a political struggle to survive in the north, it was informed by the politics of Empire and of the south. Its 'blackness' was structured by a firm commitment to the politics of alliance, a politics which sought to establish a fragile balance between acknowledging the importance of the particularities of the life histories of women of African, Asian and Caribbean descent, while forging links of solidarity out of their common experiences of oppression in Britain. The politics of alliance grew from shared conditions and oppressions – colonialism, migration and racism – and was a feminism of the workplace and the streets.

Contemporary black women writers seeking to establish the multiple origins of black British feminism have rediscovered and documented the political, grass-roots and labour activism of women like Una Marson, Claudia Jones, Olive Morris and Jayaben Desai, migrants to the UK from various parts of the British Empire in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> Establishing this history is important, but it has underestimated the significance of the various knowledges that these women brought with them to the UK and that contributed to their international perspective on the British political and social formation.

The Organization of Women of African and Asian Descent (OWAAD) was the first national black women's organization and held its first annual conference in 1979. The OWAAD's members included both migrant women and their first- and second-generation daughters born in the UK; anti-colonial and anti-imperialist movements in South Asia, East and West Africa and the English-speaking Caribbean informed its political agenda. Many of us were aware of those who had preceded us, but at the time we were focused on a series of very immediate struggles against, and confrontations with, a racist state: black women were fighting vigorous battles against the sexist racialization of the workplace and the exploitative terms and conditions of employment; against racist educational practices which streamed black kids into classes for the educationally subnormal;

against the racism we faced in housing and social services; against the sterilization of young black women. We were also involved in a series of protests against a deeply racist police force that was arresting and jailing our children and siblings. Women in the OWAAD also aggressively challenged the refusal of the Women's Liberation Movement (WLM) to engage or even acknowledge that colonialism and imperialism were feminist issues, and the OWAAD condemned the total failure of the WLM to address the particular oppression of black women within its ranks. It would be untrue, however, to say that there were no coalitions with white women: one of the most fruitful venues for alliance was the Rock Against Racism movement.

Informed and inspired by this alliance, intellectuals developed black feminist political and cultural theory and artistic practice. Black feminism posed multiple challenges political, social, cultural and intellectual to the critique of patriarchy as articulated by the British WLM. In particular, black feminist and anti-racist discourse contested the WLM's narrow definitions of class and gender, and articulated a powerful analysis of the ways in which processes of racialization over-determined class and gender oppression. Though the OWAAD as a national movement, split over a debate about the autonomous organizing of black lesbians, had fragmented by the mid-1980s, alliances of Asian and African-Caribbean women can still be seen in local organizations that focus on particular issues, like Southall Black Sisters who work to empower black women experiencing gender and domestic violence.<sup>3</sup>

'Black' in black feminism or 'womanism' in the United States is limited in its application to African American women. I have been dismayed to find US black feminism to be far more narrowly class bound and nationally parochial than the UK.<sup>4</sup> (It has also not escaped the narrow-minded, uncritical and unreflective patriotism which has dominated American politics since 9/11 2001.)

An exception to the narrow frame of reference among African American feminist activists would be Angela Davis, who has for many years called for a feminist politics of alliance and solidarity between and among women of colour, and organizations like INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, which was 'formed to continue efforts to develop strategies to end violence that addressed community and state violence simultaneously', and

focuses on grass-roots organizing. It has a broader social, political and economic framework against violence than Southall Black Sisters.<sup>5</sup>

Currently, the US academy is dominated by a feminism that appears to concern itself with transnational issues but, as is the case at my own institution, consists of a cadre of middle-class women who organize only with other universities in the North, and for whom women of the south are abject subjects.

I would argue that a transnational and international politics of alliance with the south is what we need to build for the future in order to counter an insidious turn to the politics of cultural identity which uses cultural difference as the ground for drawing absolute distinctions between and among human beings producing and supporting ideologies of cultural normativity, cultural pathology and a politics of the body. The model for a world feminist forum would be complex and draw its strength from its numerous local bases. Perhaps the model would be, could be similar to that of the World Social Forum,<sup>6</sup> and we could benefit from the example of its weaknesses.

If our first encounter with the forces of globalization was the transatlantic trade in enslaved bodies, we now live and die under a system of global governance led by institutions such, as the World Bank and the IMF that are the direct inheritors of that trade and manage all our bodies through the negotiations of capital. Only with a transnational and multi-national feminist alliance can we hope to emancipate ourselves from such biopolitical governmentality.

## Notes

\* Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

1. See Hazel V. Carby (1987), *Reconstructing Womanhood* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).

2. 'Black feminism in the United Kingdom', available at <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/6004/Black-Feminism-in-the-United-Kingdom.html>, accessed 30 July 2013.

3. See the Southall Black Sisters website: [www.southallblacksisters.org.uk](http://www.southallblacksisters.org.uk).

4. Alliances have existed like that between African American and Latina lesbians in Salsa Soul Sisters, Third World Wimmin Inc Collective, but the organization now exists as African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change, the oldest black lesbian organization in the United States. Wikipedia, 'Salsa Soul Sisters', available at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salsa\\_Soul\\_Sisters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salsa_Soul_Sisters), accessed 30 July 2013.

5. See the INCITE! website at [www.incite-national.org](http://www.incite-national.org).

6. See [www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Social\\_Forum](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Social_Forum).



## CHAPTER 39

# Between Feminism and Social Engineering: The Troubled Trajectory of International Gender Activism

*Deniz Kandiyoti\**

This chapter offers reflections on three major sets of influences whose combined effects have created a particularly challenging conjuncture for the pursuit of feminist agendas since the 1990s. These are the post-feminist turn in the North, the global ‘technocratization’ of gender issues (a phenomenon I refer to as ‘donor-driven gender activism’) and a heightened politicization of gender following the events of 11 September 2001 and the ensuing ‘war on terror’.

In many senses, the gap between North and South has widened, and vocabularies and priorities have become more divergent in 2009 than they were in 1975 (viz. the first UN International Conference on Women in Mexico City). Movements for gender justice and social justice have been drifting apart while social movements and players with conservative agendas (such as the Vatican and diverse Islamist movements) have taken up platforms for social justice. Some have noted, in relation to the Middle East, that compliance with gender conditionalities (such as setting up dedicated machineries for the advancement of women or increasing women’s political participation) is a soft option for authoritarian regimes in comparison to moving towards democratic representation and social justice. This leaves women’s movements in the unenviable position of either playing along with repressive or corrupt governments in the service of a donor-driven gender agenda or trying to find virtue in Islamist oppositions

that generally offer them little room for manoeuvre on the gender justice front.

However, putting down divergences between North and South to geopolitics fails to address the ‘disconnect’ at the heart of feminist/gender theorizing itself, and the different lenses through which we apprehend reality. While the UN conference in Beijing in 1995 arguably represented the coming of age of the ‘gender agenda’ and its official incorporation into development policy, it was also the occasion for calling into question the conceptual foundation of the subject matter of the conference itself – that is, the concept of gender with its implicit notions of injustice and the mutability of gender relations.

It is important to acknowledge that the changing ‘canons’ in the field of gender studies and gender theory (or of ‘gender feminism’) were themselves the product of social changes in the North. Post-feminism arose against a background of the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to family and sexuality, and a process of liberalization with regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations (such as gay couples adopting children, same-sex marriage or civil partnerships). This coincided with a period in academia when the representational claims of second-wave feminism were interrogated by post-colonial and post-structuralist feminists, and there was a shift of interest from centralized power blocks (such as the state, patriarchy or the law) to more dispersed sites and events – such as the body and the subject – which became focal points of feminist interest in the North. Ironically, while post-feminists in the North participated in a backlash against what they saw as a tyrannical regime of feminist Puritanism, in countries of the South feminism was interpreted (and castigated) as libertarianism and licentiousness. The anti-feminisms of the South (on both the left and right) met with the post-feminisms of the North at a point when the global *dispositif* regulating a neoliberal regime of gender equality was disseminating a set of uniform technocratic rules and practices.

I use the case of Afghanistan as a stark illustration of the confluence of these diverse influences and of their dysfunctional outcomes. The Northern feminists and public intellectuals who wrote about imperial designs vis-à-vis Afghan women were primarily concerned with the transformation of their own state and society in the aftermath of the 9/11 events. The objectification of Afghan women as ‘exoticized victims’ and their

deployment as an instrument of war propaganda was but one item in a noxious mix that included the suspension of liberties through the Patriot Act, and new forms of legal impunity around the use of torture and extra-legal detention. A common reaction to the ‘othering’ of women in Afghanistan was, paradoxically, a fulsome recognition of their radical alterity. This inadvertently bolstered a ‘cultural’ framing of gender relations which acted to obfuscate the social and political effects of successive foreign interventions establishing the ascendancy of a variety of Islamist parties backed by foreign patrons.

Meanwhile, the international community was expressing its commitment to redressing past wrongs through a process of policy diffusion: a dedicated national machinery, the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MOWA), was set up; a National Action Plan for Women (NAPWA) was adopted; and the ‘toolbox’ of gender mainstreaming was deployed in Afghanistan. However, the blueprint of ‘gender mainstreaming’ inhabited a technocratic space almost entirely divorced from political processes in Afghanistan where powerful local players, including members of the clerical establishment, continue to strike deals over legislation and dispositions primarily affecting women (as with the recent case of the Shi‘i Personal Status Code). The general malaise about the ineffectiveness and misdirection of aid carried the additional bonus, when it came to gender issues, of being laden with the charge of importing Western, and therefore alien, concepts, thus intimidating and silencing would-be local defenders of women’s rights. Thus, despite the fact that discourses about women and gender in Afghanistan ostensibly emanated from very different discursive universes (the ‘feminism-as-imperialism’ critique of detractors of armed intervention, the global gender equality agenda of international governance institutions and the politically motivated assertions of cultural authenticity by powerful local players), their mutual interactions can be shown to have led to particularly perverse outcomes.

## **Note**

\* SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, UK.



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